University of Alberta

There Be Dragons:

The Anxious Chronicles

by

Miji Campbell ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *There Be Dragons: The Anxious Chronicles* submitted by Miji Campbell in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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To my sister,

Kim

Abstract

There Be Dragons: The Anxious Chronicles is a work of creative non-fiction crafted from the author's memories, perceptions and reflections, written over several years in a series of personal "notebooks." In three sections titled "Moving Out," "Getting Married" and "Going Solo," the author explores critical events in her adult life in order to make sense of her feelings of failure and resulting anxieties. She reaches back into her memories of growing up in Calgary during the 1960's and '70's in order to find the source of her impossibly high expectations for "the perfect life." At the centre of her idealism is the powerful role model of her mother. Through an interweaving of narrative and poetry, the thesis not only chronicles a woman's journey toward independence and different choices than her mother's, it also witnesses the emergence of a writer shaping real life events in literary ways.

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For my sons and Gerald who knew that I needed a room of my own and, generally, avoided it.

For my mom and dad and Kingsland.

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Prologue

Three months before I was born, my mother was putting linen away on the top shelf of the closet in the back bedroom. Standing tiptoe on a little wooden stool, she stretched her five-foot frame just enough to stack the sheets – freshly plucked from the clotheslines and pressed smooth – into even rows. Suddenly, the stool skittered sideways across the hardwood floor. My mother fell, twisting to avoid landing baby-side-down, wrenching her knee and ripping ligaments instead. A plaster cast from waist to ankle would follow.

On the day I was born, the nurse had to ask the doctor whether to birth the baby or remove the cast. I came first. They sawed the cast off immediately after. The left side of my face had been flattened by three months of imposed stillness. My mother waited for surgery that would leave a white scar in the shape of a cross on her knee.

This became the working model for our relationship: my mother would protect me from all bumps and falls, with considerable pain and peril to herself, and I would never – really – leave the womb.

First Attempt:

Moving Out

It was time to move out, as all children do eventually. My two older sisters had left in their turn and I expected I'd do the same.

I was twenty-four years old and it was 1984, a portentous year to be teaching English at the Calgary high school I'd attended six years earlier. The plan was to stay at my parents' just long enough to get my student loans under control and save a little money. My "hope chest" was stored in the back bedroom, a cache of brand new dishes, towels and kitchen gadgets. A Picasso print was rolled up in a cardboard tube.

When I saw the apartment I knew it was the place for me. Brand new with underground parking. Close enough to work and the neighbourhood I grew up in without being in the neighbourhood. This felt like independence. The damage deposit was only $350 and rent was $450 a month. As I moved all my stuff in over the Christmas break, I felt happy.

I hung Picasso above my bed. I arranged my weightier books from university on my new IKEA bookshelves. I stacked colour-coordinated towels in the linen closet. I filled my spice rack with cumin, coriander and Hungarian paprika. I picked up paté and croissants from Woodward's Famous Food Floor on my way home from work – just like any young single career woman would. I loved this life.

But I never slept at my apartment.

At first, it was more of a logistical thing. I'd unpack and organize by day, then go home to my parents' to sleep, until I was completely moved in. By the time I resumed teaching that January, it seemed appropriate to start sleeping at my apartment except maybe that first night before work, I reasoned, because I wanted to get a good sleep. Which I could at Mom's.

The next night in my apartment, it was official: I'd moved out. I snuggled under my new goose down duvet and flowered Marimeko sheets and waited for my first night's sleep as an independent adult. I waited. Turned from one side to the other. Tried to ignore the bright red minutes on the clock radio. Restlessness turned into worry. Why couldn't I fall asleep? The next night, same thing. And the night after that.

As exhaustion gathered, I mentioned my sleeplessness to some of the teachers at work. They gave stock soporific remedies: hot bath, warm milk, good book. Some suggested sex – or since I was unattached at the time – masturbation. One friend told me about a jag of insomnia during her marriage break-up. She had no advice but was sympathetic. Finally, I confessed to my mother. "Just come home to sleep," she said.

By 11:30 or midnight – after giving sleep the old college try in my apartment – I would feel the panic rise. Get out of bed, throw on my sweats, rush downstairs and across the parkade, full of echoes and night time suspense, to my green Renault Le Car (which had originally belonged to my mother) and drive the twenty blocks – under cover of darkness – home. I'd use my key to open the door (Mom and Dad had long since gone to bed) and crawl into my old single bed. In the morning, I'd rush back to my apartment to shower and get ready for school. Eat breakfast. Drive to work. All grown-up-like.

It was a strange double life. I could forgive myself the problems I'd had sleeping at Brownie Camp at ten or my failed attempts to sleep over at my best friend Karen's. (Her dad had to bundle me in a blanket and carry me back to my porch at dusk.) But there was an impatient side to me now that didn't like these eleventh-hour sleepovers and wanted me to get past it. Now.

So, every two or three nights, I'd make myself stay in my apartment. Hot bath. Warm milk. Good book. I'd agree to give myself one hour to fall gently asleep. At the end of my deadline, wide-awake, I would feel the frustration. Hot tears and shame: "Why can't I do this? What's wrong with me?" Then the old panic: "I'll never get to sleep. I'll be so tired tomorrow. I won't be able to teach." There were even commercials on TV at 2 a.m., I discovered, that posed these same questions: "Why aren't you sleeping? You'll feel terrible in the morning." A cruel marketing ploy for a captive audience of insomniacs. Most nights, I gave up before it became too ridiculously late, and drove home.

My father, noting this late night trend, was mystified by my boomerang home again. He'd left his own parents at sixteen and never looked back. "What are you afraid of? Bears?" he asked in that same sonorous, derisive tone he used to dissect the mysteries of my mother's allegiance to the Catholic Church. I tried to explain that I really wasn't afraid of anything, I just couldn't get to sleep. "Maybe you can get day rates at your apartment," he joked.

It was clear this not-sleeping thing was not going to pass. I went to our family doctor. He gave me sleeping pills, Halcion, just for ten days to "break the cycle." It

worked. I got a few nights' solid sleep. When the prescription was done, the pattern re-emerged. I went home to Mom.

I went to see a brand new doctor – a woman. Maybe my problem needed younger guns. She suggested that I could be depressed. I was absolutely fine, I said, I just couldn't sleep. She prescribed a drug called Anafranil to replace the ketones – or something – in my brain that were apparently depleted from lack of sleep. Dutifully, I took the prescription and went straight to the drugstore. The pills came with all kinds of stickers about alcohol and drowsiness. The pharmacist gave me verbal warnings, which I missed in my rush to get out of the store. To appear normal.

I began to take them that night. Still no sleep. I called in sick the next day because I felt spaced-out on top of the usual tiredness. I called the doctor. She increased the dosage. I got spacier. I moved back to Mom's to be "sick" but she kept wanting me to go to work. Every morning, she told me to try: "The walk through the fresh morning air will wake you up." Somehow, I knew that showing up in that state would cause my teaching confidence to crumble as well.

Mom didn't like the way our private pact around not sleeping was beginning to compromise my day job. Insomnia could be beaten, she believed, if you denied that it was even a problem. This approach had kept her from sleeping soundly for years while never missing a day of teaching. I couldn't fake it by day. I couldn't even function. And I sure as hell couldn't sleep.

Don't let yourself get overtired, Mom had always told me.

I was seriously overtired. But this wide-awake fuzzy-edged world of Anafranil scared me more than not sleeping. I couldn't wait to get to the other side of "mood

improvement" if it meant wandering – zombie-like – through every day. I felt like some tragic character from a Greek myth – the one who asks for eternal life but forgets to ask for eternal youth. I'd asked for sleep but forgot to ask them to let me close my eyes and lie down.

I flushed the Anafranil down the toilet. I took a multivitamin instead.

After four consecutive sick-leave days – more than my mother took in her entire teaching career – I went back to work. I wrote the first behavioral objective in my daily planbook: "Students will be able to recognize their teacher."

They did and my teaching year rolled into March and April. I stood up confidently in front of every class, jumped through the hoops of evaluation with meticulously planned English lessons. Pretty good considering I still wasn't sleeping. Still going home to catch up. Daily conversations with colleagues included the question "So, how's the sleeping?" Macbeth's grief over his own lost sleep had never seemed so poignant. What had I done to murder my sleep?

That Easter, I booked a flight to Vancouver to visit a girlfriend. Her west end apartment, close to the edgy Davey Street and the night hum of English Bay, was a world apart from the safe predictability of my neighbourhood in Calgary. I spent my days shopping relentlessly. West Fourth. Broadway. Granville. At night, I slept. On two square foam cushions shoved together on the hardwood floor, I slept. While Ruth and her boyfriend argued and thrashed and smoked in the bedroom beside me, I slept.

Later that week, while shopping at the Pacific Centre, I ran into my mother – who had, as it turned out, also planned an Easter break to Vancouver with her friend. I could

have cried. There I was, looking like an adult, and there she was to catch me out. "How's the sleeping?" I could have lain on the floor of Eaton's ladies wear and kicked and pounded and screamed.

Out of adult politeness, Ruth and I had lunch with my mother and her friend at a bistro called Le Crocodile. I couldn't look at Mom or have a conversation with her. I let Ruth carry on with her big voice and gestures. I could feel Mom's eyes on my face. Wanting me to look at her. Insisting. No. I look at the menu. The traffic outside. The posters on the wall. Anywhere but those brown eyes so different from my own. Deep pools of sympathy and gentle admonishment. In her eyes, I would see that I was just a kid, after all, playacting in the big city. Dressing up. Putting on high heel shoes and glamorous hats and gloves and going out to luncheons. It would be bedtime soon and mommy would be calling. Don't look.

I returned to Calgary and insomnia.

By the long weekend in May, I resolved to quit this pattern of going home to sleep once and for all. I forced myself to stay in my apartment. Friday night. No sleep. Saturday night. No sleep. By Sunday, I was desperate. I would beat this no matter what. I lay down. The red numbers of my clock radio flashed 11:00. Turn over. Breathe. Relax. Think about the day's events. Pray a little. "Hail Mary, full of grace." Is there a patron saint for sleeping? Check the time. One hour gone. I move to the living room and lie down. The carpet is hard and rough against my skin. It is dark and still and I am alone. Why can't I sleep? Why can't I do this? I start to cry, hitting the carpet with my fist.

It is morning. I hear birds chirping and the familiar sound of the rustling trees outside my bedroom window. By the angle of the sun through the curtains, I know that I have slept later than I wanted. There are sounds and smells from the kitchen. Toast popping, cutlery clanking. My dad is making his lunch: Puritan meat spread with hot mustard on brown toast and pickled egg on the side. I'm too embarrassed to face him. To interrupt his routine.

I lie in bed, wondering what May long weekends for normal adults feel like. Camping. Hiking. Sailing.

I see the doorknob turn slowly, quietly. Soon, Mom will peer around the edge of the door to see if I'm awake. Just as she did when I took my afternoon naps. Should I fake that I'm asleep? She tiptoes across the room and bends over me. "Why can't I sleep?" I ask her. "What am I doing wrong?" Hot tears of shame. "I can't do anything. I'm no good at anything."

Mom murmurs and tries to pet me. I throw off her hand. I kick against the covers. "I'm stupid. I can't do anything right." I lift my head and slam it down on the pillow. I snarl through clenched teeth, "I'm going crazy." I grab chunks of my hair and pull.

My mother rushes into the hallway. I hear her dial the phone. She talks in urgent whispers to Dr. Moriarty's answering service. I sit up on the bed. I stare at the wad of hair in my hand. Somewhere inside me, a calm voice reassures, *"You know you're not crazy."*

I'm sitting in my car in front of a three-story character home in Bankview, just off Seventeenth Avenue. This is the address I've been given. It is a hot June afternoon. I have rushed from school to get here. I am wearing a new white cotton suit with a red and white striped shirt. I want to look self-assured. Confident. Pulled together even though I may be falling apart. Deep breath. Go.

I walk up the steps to the porch. A handwritten card points up the stairs. I climb and step into a sunroom that looks out over the trees and street. Like the ones where I used to imagine they kept that neighbour lady Mrs. Jackson who went crazy. This room is filled with light and air and gentle breezes.

This is my first visit to a psychologist.

I try hard to sound like I don't need one. I talk quickly, using bigger words than usual. My life sounds so normal when I lay it out like this. Great job, nice friends, excellent family, new apartment. A bit of a sleeping problem.

She wants to know more about this. So I fill her in. Condense the last six months into a comic monologue. Shove my night fears under this rational daylight. "I just can't sleep."

She shows me some breathing and relaxation techniques. I lie on the floor to practise. She wants to see me again in two weeks. This will take more than one session.

She gives one firm directive as I leave: "Do not go to back your mother's house to sleep."

If you can't sleep, says my psychologist, you might as well use the time productively.

The night shift begins. I set up the ironing board with the laundry basket beside it. I thread a needle and poke it into the arm of the loveseat. Ready to sew buttons. Stitch fallen hems. I stack English essays that need to be graded on my dining room table.

I try to sleep for forty-five minutes. No luck. I get up, snap on the light. Do forty pushups and sit-ups. Scrawl pissed-off thoughts into the blank journal waiting on my nightstand: "Funny how my circadian rhythms are so fucked up." Sometimes I laugh out loud.

I proceed to chores. Ironing. Sewing. Marking. I hear birds as early morning light slants into my apartment. I lie down and drift into a half sleep. Soon it will be time to get up. My head aches.

Two hard weeks go by. I am driving back to my apartment late one night. It is rainy and dark and I am achingly homesick. I am tired of being alone. I am tired of being tired. I turn off Macleod Trail into the neighbourhood where my parents live. Kingsland. Sanctuary. The house is still. Rain beats on the roof. I stare at the ceiling as I lie in my childhood bed. My mother sits, yawning, beside me waiting until I fall asleep.

I don't. I am irrevocably awake.

I get up and drive home to my apartment, curiously relieved.

Insomnia continued through the summer, although it seemed less jagged without teaching. I was beginning to worry about September and the return of routine when my oldest sister, Kim, called me from Lethbridge. This was a rare occurrence. We weren't in the habit of phoning each other or staying connected in any sense. She lived with an

anthropology professor twenty-four years her senior and spent most of her time experimenting with ethnic cooking, reading books and managing her own anxieties.

My sister says, "I think I know why you're not sleeping."

Her words are like water.

The Kingdom

I lived my entire childhood in a three-bedroom bungalow in a Calgary suburb called Kingsland. That I was spending a good chunk of my adult life there was an ironic testimony to my father's one guiding principle in raising a family: Never move. Stable home begets stable children.

Mom and Dad had come to parenthood late by 1950's standards. Both were well into their thirties by the time Kim was born in Goose Bay, Labrador, where Dad, one of the first air traffic controllers, was stationed in the airforce. As a bachelor, he'd enjoyed diverse postings in Frobisher Bay, Moncton and Windsor, miles away from his happy but commonplace boyhood in Whitewood, Saskatchewan. Now a family man, he worried about the pitfalls of a peripatetic military life.

My mother had a peripatetic life of her own. As a child, she'd lived in Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and Melville – moves necessitated by a father who had a great head for business but drank. He eventually deserted the family, leaving my grandmother Nan to find work while my mother raised her little brother and sister. It was a bleak and difficult life. She couldn't wait to leave home and at eighteen, returned to Saskatoon for Normal School. Six weeks later, she launched her illustrious teaching career from a one-room schoolhouse in Allan, Saskatchewan.

My parents deserved the prosperity and promise of the 1950's: secure jobs, safe neighbourhoods, new houses and cars.

My father began his sales career with Pyrotenax of Canada within days of his formal military discharge. The personnel manager liked his assertive footfall on the stairs

and hired him on the spot. Dad would open up the prairie territory, spreading the good news about Pyrotenax heating cables – an important technology for the up and coming concrete of our cities. Calgary, population 50,000, would become home.

I was born on the edge of winter in December, 1959, the third and last child. Things were pretty much in place when I arrived: father at work and mother at home with my sisters Kim, four, and Robin, one-and-a-half. With her own children, Mom intended to get things right. We would have a golden childhood.

Our u-shaped crescent is called Kirby Place. Big green streetlights have little doors for short magic creatures in the bottom. There are stucco houses trimmed with blue, red or brown. Some have carports. There is our house, green with shrimp-coloured trim. There are two birch trees on our lawn – planted with wires to keep them safe from wind. Two mugo pines flank the front porch, guarding our castle in the Kingdom of Kingsland.

The entryway is filled with sunlight. Long hallway rugs run over gleaming hardwood. The living room is for company. The black chesterfield has sparkles and satin cushions. There are ashtrays in case a visitor smokes. There are two chairs with maple spindles and brocade cushions. The rocking chair is my favourite – an island for my mother and me on those nights when I cry and can't sleep.

There is a square brown easy chair where my father reads the newspaper. He puts his feet on the footstool and sometimes one of us kids will squish in beside him.

There is a coffee table in a shamrock shape. There are Hummel figurines on a curio shelf. I like the boy who whistles and carries an umbrella. Do not touch. There is a painting of a woman baking bread – a white cloth covers her hair – and I think she is

a man. Over the piano is a painting of a violin in a dark wood frame. Our television sits silent until nighttime.

The dining room table is round and polished with four ladder back chairs. Inside the tall buffet are bayberry candles that smell like Christmas.

The kitchen floor is a checkerboard of tomato red and celery green tiles. Brick patterned wallpaper covers the original green enamel paint. We eat all our meals at the arborite table on red Melmac plates.

Along the back hallway are three bedrooms. Robin and I share the pink and mint green room. The blue room with striped wallpaper belongs to Kim alone. Our parents have the candy-cane red and white room with matching bedspread, curtains and lampshades. The bathroom has bright yellow everything.

The basement is wide open and echoes. Our mother has painted hopscotch squares on the cement floor. A red hula-hoop hangs from a steel bolt in the wall. There are shelves with books and puzzles and games like Steps'n Chutes. We play house with empty cardboard boxes and have imaginary children who misbehave. There is a real chalkboard and three old-fashioned wooden desks with inkwells for playing school. A toybox holds roller skates, tap-dancing shoes and crinolines for dress-up.

I am afraid of the crawl space under the stairs. What hides behind those golf clubs in checkered bags, the steamer trunk and brown suitcase filled with Christmas decorations? Blue flames flicker in the furnace that groans on and off. The hot water tank gurgles and hisses. Between the washer and dryer by the drain hose lives another witch – or sometimes a white-haired, wrinkled, bug-eyed troll like in my book of *Grimm's Fairy*

Tales. He could snatch my ankles if I don't scoot fast enough up the stairs. I yank the cord on the lightbulb, return the dark to the basement – and run.

Up the stairs and out the back door is the backyard with flat square lawn for croquet or running through the sprinkler. There is a swingset and sandbox on the driveway by the back lane. A little sidewalk loops around to the front beside flowerbeds of columbines and peonies. Here the lawn slopes gently – perfect for continuous somersaults. Sometimes, we play frozen tag or Kick-the-Can with the older kids on the block. My best friend and I hide behind the garbage cans. I hear my heart pound in my ears and I want to giggle or cry. They will never find us here.

My best friend Karen lived two doors down in a house cluttered with possibilities. Drawings and fingerpaintings by all four children hung on yellow kitchen walls next to Van Gogh's sunflowers. A ceramic duck cookie jar was filled with Snickerdoodles. There was a built-in china cabinet and a clothes chute and a big stereo that stacked records and plunked them – one by one – onto the turntable below. They had the first automatic dishwasher on the block and after that, a new baby brother.

Karen's bedroom was lilac with pouffy curtains and rumpled quilts. She shared it with her younger sister so there were two of most things on the dresser. Two lacey lampshades with crystal bases. Two jewelry boxes with plastic ballerinas that twirled to music. Karen was a ballerina. She had long ash blonde hair, hazel eyes, and perfect teeth. I dreamed of being the piano accompanist for her performances. I didn't like to share Karen with anyone, not even her little sister.

Her closet floor was a tangle of Barbies with naked limbs, their wardrobes spilling out of a checkered pasteboard suitcase. Karen's Chatty Kathy had wild hair and a dangling pull cord. A pajama bag doll with a smiling plastic face sprawled across the Etch-a-Sketch. There were orange toy telephones that really worked for secret conversations down halls and stairways.

(The bedroom I shared with my sister was always tidy; our twin beds had smooth matching bedspreads. Our closet floor held no surprises and smelled of Johnson's paste wax. My Chatty Kathy sat primly in a little chair. My Barbies lived in their vinyl cases, staring up beside their carefully packed wardrobes.)

Karen and I would spend entire days together, the angle of the sunshine through the windows changing morning to afternoon. We'd watch "The Friendly Giant" and argue over who got what chair to curl up in. Or "Romper Room" where we waited hopefully for Miss Ann to look through her magic mirror and *say our names*. "I see Laurie and Shirley and Bobbie…" Some days, we would walk to the park two blocks away, and climb the big slide with BLUE IMP stamped on each rung. We would give each other under-pushes on the swings. We could lie on our backs on the merry-go-round and never get dizzy.

Every now and then, Mrs. Ferchuk would load all the kids into the blue Pontiac station wagon and we'd be off for picnics in the country – the dust from gravel roads scudding behind us. We arrived in magical places with turquoise blue waterfalls and sun-warmed rock. Mrs. Ferchuk knew all about wildflowers and birds and berries. We picked rose petals to make jam. My mom said it tasted like perfume.

When Karen's dad came home from work, he'd ask, "Where's the prettiest dollies on the block?" Then he'd scoop up his two daughters to tickle and kiss them. Catching sight of me, he'd chant the rhyme that always made me glow: "Miji Mary, quite contrary, how does your garbage grow?" Then he would affectionately kiss his wife who always went to greet him at the door. They were the most romantic grown-ups in my world.

One day, Mr. Ferchuk brought his girls home a present: high-heeled plastic shoes that fastened with a thin elastic strap and bunches of sheer netting. They were translucent pink with flecks of gold. Glamorous shoes that dancers or movie stars might wear.

I wished my dad worked downtown.

My dad worked downstairs.

The western hub of Pyrotenax of Canada Limited was in our basement. In a room he'd finished with pineboard panelling, a suspended ceiling of white acoustic tile, a floor of red and black linoleum squares – one yellow square set whimsically at its centre – Dad set up his solo sales rep operation.

The desk was a heavy plywood board set on two squat green metal filing cabinets. Three drawers for business accounts and one drawer for family matters and his so-called Wastepaper File – a collection of notable news clippings about the space race and airplane crashes, mostly – but also quirky stories and how-to's. He liked to show visitors his article from a 1937 *Popular Mechanics* magazine on the "swinging gate method" of improving one's golf swing.

Dad began work at eight a.m. for twenty-five years. My friends wondered if he ever went to work in his pajamas. He'd head downstairs with a mug of black instant

coffee dressed in his suit, shirt and tie. At nine, he'd go out on sales calls, leaving his telephone answering service to take messages. Every other week, he travelled to Edmonton to proselytize about Pyrotenax heating cables: copper wires sheathed in white magnesium oxide that conduct electricity without melting or burning.

In the far corner of Dad's downstairs office – set apart from Pyrotenax display boards – was an alto saxophone on its metal claw stand. Back when Dad was ten, the barber in Whitewood got him started in the local Boys' Band. The violin, so loved by Dad's father the dentist, had been a non-starter for young George, who listened, nightly, to the dance band sounds of Artie Shaw and the Dorsey Brothers from distant hotel ballrooms of America, travelling crystal clear on radio waves to a starlit Saskatchewan sky.

Our nights were filled with the sound of Dad playing his saxophone in the basement. A swing counterpoint to our bedside prayers.

If our house is a castle, then our mother is the queen. She is also the cook, housekeeper, governess, nurse, gardener and treasurer. Our father is the groundskeeper, minstrel and chauffeur who works in the basement spinning copper wire into gold.

If our house is a castle, then we are royal children. Sheltered and slightly spoiled. There will be Christmases where presents from Santa magically appear after bedtime on Christmas Eve. Teddy bears, dollhouses, new pajamas. There will be summer holidays in Jasper and Banff and Radium where we get to eat in restaurants and stay at motels with swimming pools. We will have a cairn terrier named Haggis, spoiled as well. There will be piano lessons for Kim and me – and speech arts for Robin, who wears dresses of velvet and taffeta for her prize-winning solos at the Kiwanis Music Festival.

(Like a wicked stepsister, I envied everything about Robin. Her glossy dark hair bounced with ringlets, if my mother had her way, or braids, if Robin did. She could run fast and scale fences and throw a baseball like a boy. She thought up the best games. She could be teacher's pet without even trying. She held my mother's heart.)

If our house is a castle, then our Kingdom stretches east to Macleod Trail – dagger straight and raw with commerce. Car dealerships. Restaurants. Motor Inns. To the west, Elbow Drive meanders, lined with tall poplars and stately homes with names like Windover. This is the road that takes us to church and downtown for doctors' appointments. To the south is Heritage Drive and the YMCA for swimming lessons. To the north is Glenmore Trail and the sweetest place on earth: Chinook Shopping Centre. Every Saturday, our family would drive to Chinook Centre and witness the passage of seasons indoors.

In spring, there were trips to the sporting goods department in Woodward's. It smelled of bike tires and plastic skipping ropes in lime green and orange and pink. In summer, there was the Stampede pancake breakfast and trips to the Chinook Public Library in the lower mall with its smells of barbershop, shoe repair and burger platters from businesses nearby. This was a hushed sacred space. All was quiet except for the click of the microfiche camera or the distant thunder from the bowling alley. In fall, there were back-to-school sales with brand new Laurentian Pencil Crayons that I would ferret away in my underwear drawer. Exotic colours like Hollywood Cerise, Arizona Topaz and Saratoga Orange.

Each winter, we'd watch the gentle progress of Christmas at Chinook Centre. In early December, the Christmas scene would be assembled up on the roof (plywood and

paint but magical just the same). First came the red brick fireplace and chimney. Then, three cartoon kids looking upward in their nightgowns and nightcaps. The next week, the stockings would be nailed onto the red brick chimney. Close to Christmas Eve, we would drive by with anticipation that ached. Santa Claus would be there, high atop the chimney.

Inside Chinook Centre, there was Santa's Toyland castle with toy elves and reindeer that moved. There were telephones to the North Pole where you could listen to Rudolph, or Mrs. Claus, or Frosty the Snowman. Overhead, there were choirs of angels on clouds of pink and blue candyfloss – much better than church.

Chinook Centre we could share as a family. For church we splintered into factions. Mom was devoutly Catholic and Dad unequivocally agnostic. We three girls would be raised Catholic in every way. Sunday mornings would find us driving south on Elbow Drive to St. Gerard's Church, our mother gripping the steering wheel of her white Chevrolet Epic, hell-bent for nine o'clock mass.

At church, our mother recited the prayers with perfect diction and at a pace just slightly ahead of the rest of the congregation. She sang in spite of her admitted lack of tone and glared our way if we didn't. At home, she was more discreet. There was a Kitchen Prayer plaque by the stove that began "Oh Lord of all these pots and pans" but I never heard her say it. She hung a holy calendar on the inside of the hall closet with the floor polisher and cleaning supplies. She used the back of church envelopes for grocery and "To Do" lists. She didn't need them every week because she gave her sacrificial offering to God in a once-a-month lump sum. (I recall my own sense of betrayal when I realized that my weekly offering of a nickel, or my whole dime of allowance, did not go to poor people in a far-off country. It got no further than the church sacristy, where I

could hear the baskets of loose change being dumped after mass by the ushers in black suits and crisp ties.)

Like most of my mother's personal life, she kept her faith guarded and private. Stowed in the middle drawer of her bureau were relics of a bygone Catholicism: a worn leather missal, rosary and a green felt Scapular of the Blessed Virgin Mary on a string – a talisman for conversion. Every night my mother knelt beside her bed in an anguished posture that echoed Jesus in Gethsemane.

As children, we had sunnier Catholic rituals. There were white crucifixes above our beds with plastic rosaries looped around Jesus on the cross. We received the childhood sacraments in new white dresses and veils. We read books called *Good Manners in God's House* and prayed to guardian angels and for the poor souls in Purgatory. And we prayed for our father to convert.

(Dad did not even set foot in St. Gerard's until my best friend's wedding years later. Fidgeting beside me, he leafed through the daily missal and noticed that the funeral mass was first. "That's pretty bad P.R.," he chuckled.)

The outside world never ventured far inside our ten blocks of Kingsland. We were sheltered from life's complications. A fleet of friendly breadmen, milkmen and mailmen patrolled the streets. Paperboys tossed news of the outside in. Our parents poured themselves a drink and retreated behind newsprint walls. We children went out to play.

Beyond this Kingdom, there be dragons.

Dragons

It is night time in my bedroom and I am afraid.

Sudden bright rectangles of light chase around the corners of my room. Headlight beams from passing cars.

I am afraid of the dark behind the closet in my bedroom. The heavy doors roll like thunder.

A witch lives under my bed at night. If I look – she will scramble up the other side out of sight. She has striped stockings like the wicked witch that Dorothy's house landed on.

I am afraid of being the last one to fall asleep.

I share the room with my sister Robin. She is a good sleeper but she wets the bed. Her snoring keeps me awake. Our mother comes into the room and turns her over gently. Then she sits beside me until I sleep.

My sister Kim had trouble sleeping, too. She avoided sleepovers and summer camps and felt that awful rising fear as everyone else falls gently asleep. Like me, she relied on Mom's bedside vigil. Our mother in flannelette pajamas, hair in curlers stabbed with pink plastic pins and trussed in a blue cotton hairnet, moved from room to room over creaking floorboards, giving a benediction for our sleep through a sacrifice of hers.

Kim had daytime fears as well. She was miserable at school. Not only was she failing, she had lost all her friends. Acceleration – that bold experiment for brainy kids – had been a disaster. Now twelve years old and midway through grade eight, Kim decided (at Mom's urging) to transfer to a Catholic girls boarding school a few miles south of the

city. She could come home on weekends to visit. There would be friendships and uniforms and choirs singing "Carol of the Bells." Maybe she would study more.

(Mom is so pleased. She said she would have given her eye teeth to go to boarding school.)

One week before she is supposed to leave, Kim stares into the dark of her bedroom. She can't fall asleep. Familiar tendrils of fear creep in. Face gets hot. Then cold. Then sweaty. She takes a big breath, then another. Is she hyperventilating? Heartbeat pounds in her ears. Allegro. Presto. Stomach swirls – is she going to be sick? What if this happens at boarding school? Terrified, she confesses to Mom that she cannot leave home.

I remember hearing Kim sob in her bedroom across the hall. I tell Mom, who folds laundry while she watches "Perry Mason" on TV. I know that she will go and comfort Kim. But tonight she doesn't. She snaps wrinkles from tea towels and tersely tells me to go back to bed.

Kim's drama unfolds without us. She cries herself out. In the calm that follows, she promises herself that someday, she will be brave enough to leave. She falls asleep.

Five years later, Kim did leave. My mother, father and I watched her figure become a pinpoint as she walked down the long corridor of the University of Lethbridge, shedding childhood and Kingsland as she walked. "She looks so small," Mom said sadly. Earlier that morning, she lay down beside my sister as she slept. Was this a valediction or an offer of last-minute deliverance? Kim – suddenly awake and ramrod straight beside her – knew there was no need for rescue.

The Kim that returned for semester breaks and holidays carried a green Army Surplus knapsack, a guitar and a string of moody boyfriends with long hair who wrote poetry. When I found a package of birth control pills in the pocket of a coat of mine that Kim had borrowed, I decided that leaving home was morally dangerous. When she moved in with her professor and stopped visiting altogether, I decided that leaving home was betrayal.

Meanwhile, my sister Robin had acquired a longhaired moody boyfriend of her own. Robin, the beautiful speech arts prodigy who recited "Queen of Sheba," now used her dramatic talent in countless teenage rages at my mother who surrendered, silent and bitter. Robin had always been popular, athletic and smart, but with this boyfriend, she began to cut classes, smoke and hang out anywhere but home. I found a film canister full of marijuana in one of her jackets that I'd worn without her permission. Late one weekend, the police brought her home in their cruiser. I woke up the next morning to a house wrapped tight with silence. Robin, outwardly defiant, inwardly mortified, set her sights on the day when she could leave for good.

It is my mother who cries at night now. Heaving sobs, rasping sounds from machinery that has rusted shut. I am sixteen and have never heard my mother cry like this. I tap on her bedroom door and speak into darkness. "Mom, what's the matter?" No answer. More of that horrible rasp. "Mom, what's wrong?"

It is wrenching – this sudden role reversal. My mother is supposed to be the strong one. My mother listens to the stories of runaways and drug addicts who are other people's children and says "oh dear" and "poor thing" in all the right places.

Her words come between sobs, "Everything I do fails."

The silence is thick and dark and damp. I rush words into place. List the good things: health, home, reasonably okay kids. (This strikes me as a thin variation on my mother's response to my own jags of teenage sadness: "Be thankful. You could be in a wheelchair.") "You have been a good mother," I tell her.

I make her some tea. I will not disappoint my mother. I will not fail.

On a Sunday night six years later in my own apartment, my sister Kim phones to tell me, "It's all right to leave Mom." Distanced by time and place and choice, she gives me absolution.

That night I fall gently, effortlessly asleep. The insomnia has released me.

I avoid my mother for weeks afterward to protect my tentative adult self.

It is all right to leave.

Second Attempt:

Getting Married

When I was ten, I drew a map of my life with no-nonsense assertions of where I planned to go. A racecar, painstakingly drawn from a real model in our toybox, wound around a curving road to a future similar to my mother's: high school graduation, university, teacher. There was one notable difference. I'd drawn an enormous diamond engagement ring and coloured it with my smoke grey Laurentian pencil crayon. A blissful marriage was my primary destination. My map ended there, on the edge of the looseleaf page.

I had grown up longing for romance.

My parents met in the Officers' Mess in North Bay, Ontario, where my mother was the new teacher at the base school. She asked my father to the Valentine's Dance. Family legend has it that she did it on a dare.

Their courtship consisted of golf and car rides in Dad's green '50 Ford Meteor to a roadhouse called Fuzzy the Bear's. Those were the things they had in common. Otherwise, they were different. Mom was sociable and outgoing. She made excellent small talk and was an attentive listener. Dad preferred discussion and debate on current events and world history. Mom loved live theatre; Dad loved his dance tunes. At parties, Mom would jitterbug while Dad played his saxophone.

The biggest stumbling block would prove to be religion. Mixed marriages were actively discouraged by the Catholic Church but Mom was so desperate to have children (five, preferably) that she temporarily put church rules aside.

My parents were married in the manse of the United Church in Pemberton, Ontario. No guests. No reception. No fanfare. It was an offstage beginning to a marriage that would always be more pragmatic than romantic, more ready-to-wear than tailor-made. Our mother had been shopping for a solid, reliable guy. Our father was a forty-four regular off-the-rack.

I planned to do marriage differently.

Courtship

I hadn't planned on getting pregnant first. I'd always included children in the master blueprint but I was working more heavily on the marriage phase when everything collapsed.

My period, usually punctual, was late. I'd always been careful with precautions although that night on the Thanksgiving weekend, I don't remember being concerned. I think I used a diaphragm. I think he used a condom. In any case, I was in the midst of long-distance relationship highs and lows and had thrown caution to the wind.

We were both twenty-nine.

Every weekend, we would pick up our intense romance where we'd left it the Sunday before. Every Friday night, I'd keep us both awake discussing where the relationship was headed. After two years of weekend commutes between Calgary and Red Deer, I wanted Commitment.

He was in no rush to commit. In his other life, he taught, coached volleyball, went for beers after work and shared an apartment with two female teachers – one of whom was particularly attractive and played volleyball better than me.

Every Saturday morning, we would be worn out from late night talking. I'd feel guilty about the hassle I'd caused by bringing up the "C" word and resolve to be more fun. By Sunday, we'd have reconnected. Sex helped. He would resume his life in Red Deer and, reluctantly, I'd resume mine in Calgary.

Onto this unsettled relationship front moved gale force winds. What if I was pregnant? Probably not – but we might as well make sure. As we performed the

Clearblue test picked up at the London Drugs nearby, we chatted about travelling to Europe that summer or maybe teaching overseas someday. We timed the test results.

Blue. Unmistakably. Irrevocably. Clearly. He confirmed it. I denied it. The package directions said false positive results were rare. He said this was kind of neat. He was taking this better than me. We were still working on being a couple when suddenly, accidentally, we were going to be three.

Dazed, we went through the motions of the rest of our Sunday afternoon. We shopped at the mall for Hallowe'en costumes to wear to school. The next day, I dressed up in a black cape – a pale imitation of my usual efforts. I felt detached, like a spectator. There was a costume parade through the school. Witches and Snow Whites and human crayons.

We had met in university. There was no real friendship until several summers later when we cycled into each other on the seawall in Vancouver. We shared George's Cookies on the beach at English Bay and laughed about our serendipitous reunion. He went back to Northern Alberta and I returned to Calgary. We promised to keep in touch.

When he moved to Red Deer two years later, I had just ended a long term relationship on the brink of a marriage proposal. (I seemed to lose interest in relationships once the romantic novelty wore off.) He was similarly single – or never spoke of any serious relationships – so we went to a Billy Joel concert together. The next day, we played squash and swam. We planned to ski the next weekend. That was how our courtship began.

I tried to prove myself to him on his terms. I took windsurfing lessons. I improved my volleyball and tennis skills. I worked at being fun all the time. I grafted a whole new dimension onto my artsy, creative self that left me, between whirlwind weekends, physically exhausted and intensely insecure.

Our family doctor's office was downtown. Dr. Moriarty had managed my health, with the help of my mother, from birth to adulthood. His sonorous, gravelly voice could penetrate examining room walls into the waiting room where polite patients and the nurse in her crisp white cap pretended not to hear. No health issue ever felt private with Dr. Moriarty and he always seemed to give the same advice: "Soak it in Epsom salts." Ankle. Head. Heart.

Thankfully, a softer-spoken doctor had taken over his practice.

For this appointment, the nurse immediately gave me the key to the washroom. I carried the jangly, dangly thing down the hall and up the stairs along with an empty cup. I stepped inside the cubicle, slid the latch across, sat down and began to cry.

Later, back in the waiting room, the nurse crossed her fingers into a plus sign, a discreet little signal that made the room spin.

The doctor, youthful in horn-rimmed glasses and argyle socks, met with me in his office. Adult to adult. Matter of fact. Without knowing all my shortcomings in the overstuffed file folder on his desk. He suggested that I might feel better seeing a woman doctor. His wife was accepting maternity cases.

New doctor. New choices. New life.

I tried hard not to resent this sudden yank of control. This body I'd learned to use – finally – with confidence, was off on some spur line without my permission. My life plan had been hugely tampered with. I wanted a big wedding and a romantic honeymoon and children when I said so. The woman doctor offered a different perspective: "We really don't have control over our lives. Some people learn that lesson by getting MS or cancer. You get to have a baby."

He and I discussed our options over brunch at a restaurant where, two years earlier, we had bumped into his parents after our first night of exploratory sex. I felt clandestine and naughty then. Now I just felt angry. And hungry. Shoved into a set of decisions that had little to do with having a baby. Marriage – although romantic and over the top in my own imagination – was still about choosing each other. Somewhere in our conversation, he said, "Maybe we don't have to get married right away." Words that felt like freedom. We had a choice. We would have the baby – not a skiff of indecision there – then decide about marriage.

Gradually, sheepishly, we let family and close friends know. My mother, expecting news of an engagement, poured herself a Scotch and sat in nervous anticipation. She would have married this man herself, so great was their sympatico. "Oh my God!" she gasped at the news and slumped her head on the kitchen table. Later she kissed my forehead, saying, "I know you wanted this to be different. We'll get through this together."

The prodigal daughter – trying to make her way in the adult world – had come back to mother.

My own mother had been born out of wedlock, the child of a bank teller named Jane Gordon and a nameless – presumably married – official on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange. Patricia Anne Gordon was born at Winnipeg's Misericordia Hospital two days after Christmas in 1922. Within weeks, she was taken into the home of Disa and Alexander Murphy, friends of her mother. Patsy became their first child, doted on and adored. A brother would be born when she was ten and, a year later, a baby sister. Her father would abandon the family soon after.

My mother believed that the Murphy's were her birth family until she discovered, at seventeen, some unfinished adoption papers stored in a steamer trunk.

I didn't know this story until I was twenty. It knocked my world sideways as I scrolled through the dramatis personae of aunts, uncles and cousins who weren't, after all. I'd liked being related to my grandmother, Nan, with her blue Icelandic eyes and fiery spirit who, during the Hungry Thirties, refused to go on Relief even though times were hard when her husband left. Nan went straight to the mayor of Saskatoon and demanded a job – which he gave her. Later, she would become the first female station agent on the CNR line.

My mother disliked my fascination with her past.

I waited until much later to break the news to my father. I knew Dad approved of the man ("He knows how to handle you") but I was afraid of his usual criticism: that I was flighty and had failed to think ahead.

When we were growing up, supper was the one meal where we were all together. My dad would sit at the head of the table, my mom to his right, then me. Robin sat across from me within kicking range. Kim sat at the other end, close to the radiator where she hid bits of unwanted food from her plate.

Suppertime was Discussion Time and my father often took this opportunity to educate us in his own fashion – a kind of mealtime Socrates – away from my mother's overarching routines of homework and piano practice. Dad's lessons were brief and didactic with regular features – not unlike *Reader's Digest*. "Increase Your Word Power" was our vocabulary drill. "What does ubiquitous mean?" he would ask in his loud voice. For "Humour in Uniform" Dad would share the jokes he'd heard while on sales calls that day. "What did the rary in the wheelbarrow say when it looked over the cliff? That's a long way to tip-a-rary!" (We needed that one explained.) As we grew older the "Drama in Real Life" cautionary lecture emerged at the dinner table. The boy down the lane had gotten a girl pregnant, "Just look what can happen after ten minutes of pleasure!" Dad exhorted. My mother rattled the dishes loudly in the sink. *She* would handle the facts of life, thank you very much.

(And she did. Books wrapped in thick plastic envelopes appeared on our beds. Kim got *What Teenagers Want to Know*. Robin had *A Doctor Talks to Nine to Twelve Year Olds*. My book was called *The Story of Life*. Mom and I read it together. She sat rigid-backed on my bed reading the text aloud, exasperated by my questions: "Why don't people have intercourse in the bathroom?" and "People only do this to have a baby, right?")

When I gave Dad the news of my pregnancy, he did not lecture. He told me the story of his older sister instead. Back in the thirties, her beau Jimmy was hired by the Imperial Bank of Commerce and was not allowed to marry until he earned a certain salary. They secretly married anyway. Three daughters were born, and sent away to be raised by a family in Toronto. The parents kept up the appearance of courtship in the small Saskatchewan town until Jimmy was promoted and transferred to Toronto where the family was reunited.

I trusted my employers would be less Draconian but I still worried over what they would expect me to do. Would I be like my sixth grade teacher who disappeared mysteriously over the Christmas break? Dad had no easy answers but his advice was unforgettably wise: "Sometimes you have to live with some suspense."

I told my principal first. "I thought you'd have known better," he said, irritated by the political fallout of my predicament. The personnel director for the school board was more upbeat. "We should be bringing out the champagne and celebrating," he said. "You've decided to have this baby." For an instant, I let myself feel proud.

Just about everyone – my parents, friends, Catholic colleagues – thought things would ultimately be smoother if we got married. I was a single pregnant teacher in a Catholic junior high school. A hasty marriage was one way around my private –largely imagined – minefield of public scorn.

We decide to get engaged. We go to a French restaurant to celebrate our decision. My little black dress – hallmark of a sexier former self – is tight over my stomach. As I expand, my life seemed to shrinks.

We shop at malls for the engagement ring, becoming experts on the four C's of diamond purchase: cut, clarity, carat and colour. We add a fifth – cost – and narrow down our choices to simple and practical. This is not how I'd pictured it at all.

When I was twelve, I started a collection of DeBeers diamond advertisements torn from back issues of *Reader's Digest* and *Life*. They were photo stories with the recurring theme of "A diamond lasts forever." I would look through the ads whenever I felt a little shaky in my adolescent world. Surely things would be better when I grew up and found true love. My favourite ad showed a young woman and her boyfriend – soon to be fiancé.

> **Frame one:** (set-up shot) Handsome Blonde Man with even teeth and Pretty Blonde Woman with blue eyes in apartment. Mad faces. Seem to be arguing.
>
> **Frame two:** (mid shot: profile) Couple yelling at each other.
>
> **Frame three:** (long shot) Girl walks out of apartment onto balcony.
>
> **Frame four:** (mid shot) Man sitting alone on couch. Tie loosened. Hair dishevelled. Looks thoughtful and remorseful.
>
> **Frame five:** (close up) Girl sniffling into lace hankie. Face tear-streaked. Hair perfect. Looks sad.
>
> **Frame six:** (long shot) Man walking out through glass patio doors to girl on balcony.
>
> **Frame seven:** (close up) Man pulls strand of girl's hair affectionately. Girl smiles through tears.
>
> **Frame eight:** (close-up) Man gives girl tiny velvet box.
>
> **Frame nine:** (close up BLOWN UP to take up the rest of the page.) Big hug. Girl smiles through fresh tears. (Caption) "A diamond lasts forever."

The real life circumstances for officially receiving my own diamond ring were romantic enough. On Christmas morning, we went for a walk in his hometown. Hoar-

frost glistened on willows against a clear blue sky. We stood together on the frozen Red Deer River. The handsome blonde man proposed. I was frozen inside but smiled anyway. He was trying hard to do things right. The ring was practically perfect.

This man who had avoided commitment four months earlier had had a remarkable change of heart. Was this true love or moral duty? I was never quite sure.

Back at the house, we show his parents the ring. They are thrilled. We tell them we are expecting a baby. They make tea. "Everything seems fine after a good cup of tea."

The wedding is set for the evening of February 17, six weeks away. Luckily, my fiancé's uncle is a priest who can expedite church rules about banns and marriage preparation courses. Since his new church is not built, we will be married in an ATCO trailer called, in the meantime, The Church of the Holy Redeemer.

A champagne reception is planned in the penthouse of the Westin Hotel. We opt for an intimate, elegant gathering that will suit the subdued nature of the celebration. No dinner. No dance. No silliness with garters and bouquets.

My best friend Karen will be my maid of honour. Her sister, an artist, designs the wedding invitation. Two cartoon penguins in wedding attire meet at a crossroads between Calgary and Red Deer. People ask if the wedding is in Didsbury.

My wedding suit of ivory wool and satin is made by a dressmaker who is unfazed by my constantly changing figure. "You've popped," she announces at my second-last fitting and sends me on a quest for a longline girdle.

The wedding portraits will be taken at a studio. There are various sets and props to choose from like a faux marble fireplace on a Persian carpet. Perhaps a pergola or a

Roman ruin. Although this wedding has a shotgun feel to it, guns are not among the props.

The registry decisions come next. The entire procedure strikes me as more than a little mercenary but my mother assures me that registering will take the guesswork out of giving. Late one January afternoon, I drop into Marcel de Paris, once a rundown purple house where I got my ears pierced, now a brick monolith for china and crystal. A saleslady scurries over.

"When is your wedding?" she inquires.

"In a month," I answer.

She is momentarily stunned. "That leaves very little time for registering properly."

"Yes," I agree. Should I mention that my prenatal class keeps getting in the way?

She points to the displays surrounding us, named for the discerning couples who have created personal statements through flatware, stemware and china. Beneath their names are the wedding dates – all a respectable distance in the future.

One such couple wanders through the store. He wears a navy melton cloth coat over his suit and tie. He has carefully styled hair and considers each plate through his wire-rimmed glasses. He discusses permutations of dishes with his fiancée – who has perfect hair as well. This couple will never have a baby without similar forethought. For a fleeting moment, I enjoy my renegade status. I am a bull in this china shop. Breaking all the rules.

At the end of each day of wedding errands and work, I returned to my upstairs apartment in an old house in South Calgary. It had been the perfect character apartment until I got pregnant. Now, the smell of old wood mingled with natural gas heaters made morning sickness rise in waves. I worried about falling down the stairs. Wind whistled through holes in the window sashes. Tree branches clawed at the panes. Pipes froze. Bathwater sat for days in the old-fashioned claw tub.

I had banished myself to a cold, unforgiving apartment in the house at the top of the hill.

Marriage

In the mornings of my childhood
Winter sun streamed through square windows that warmed the place where I sat.
Today, I am working on a puzzle
By myself.
Big chunky pieces of cardboard with a fuzzy-wuzzy coating
This puzzle is supposed to be a doll with yellow hair when it is finished.
My mom has showed me how to look for the shapes and colours at the edges of puzzles
To help me find the pieces.
I try, at first, to do that.
But there are too many pieces and none of them are fitting together in that satisfying way they do with Mom
So I push a little harder, bend the edge to make it fit.
I'm certain that's where it belongs.
My fingers
Coax
Cram
Curl into a fist
Smash the cardboard piece into place
Pretend it fits.

I am getting married
On a February night of
Snow and wind and ice
I am
Coaxing
Cramming
Curling my disappointment into a tiny cardboard happiness
Smashing it in
Pretending it fits.

Three months after the wedding, you move to Red Deer. Safely married, you can relax into a year of maternity leave.

Your days are spent settling into the grey townhouse with rose-coloured curtains. You sew, you shop, you nap. You stack the boxes of wedding china, unopened, in the upstairs closet. You paint the chest of drawers from your childhood in bold primary colours. You assemble the Storkcraft crib. You take your pregnant body for walks around raw new neighbourhoods. You feel dislocated. You make lists of things to do to chase away the homesickness.

You tell yourself to quit complaining. You married a good person. You're going to have a baby that both of you will love and care for.

Motherhood

Your son arrives a month early, during a quick trip to Calgary to visit your mother. Late afternoon in the guestroom bed, you feel what could only be your water breaking. Your mother, as with all your rites of passage, is there to witness and assist. Your father drives calmly to the Grace Hospital across the city. You sit in the front passenger seat on a plastic cloth from the picnic table. You want to scream when he stops for a yellow light. Your mother sits in the backseat.

The players are all wrong in this drama.

In time, your husband arrives with a teddy bear and the rolling pin recommended in prenatal classes. Labour is induced. Syntocin picks up where your body leaves off. You push for one and a half hours. Your doctor – her skirt on backwards in her early morning rush to the hospital – finally agrees to call the obstetrician. The baby is pulled

out quickly with stainless steel forceps that look like giant salad tongs. He is whimpering and bluish from lying on the umbilical cord. Briefly, they place him on your chest, then whisk him away. You watch the surgeon press again and again on your stomach to make your uterus stop bleeding. Then he stitches you back together. You are exhausted and euphoric. You are a mother now. You have a son named Jeramy. The compromises no longer seem important.

"Things have worked out very well," your mother tells you.

You try hard to create the married life you'd always imagined. You bake pies and make a schedule for systematic housecleaning that never quite works. You sew Christmas decorations as your son watches from his jolly jumper in the doorway.

At night, in bed, you try to work on the relationship with your new husband. You have issues to discuss, intimacy to build. He responds sleepily from some far-off shore. You feel adrift and alone, miles of ocean between you.

Frequent visits to your mother and Calgary keep you buoyant. "Gran" loves to shop for her only grandson at stores with names like "Heffalumps and Woozles." She buys toys and books and designer overalls. She entertains the baby, lying beside him on the living room carpet. She kisses him with loud, wet smacks. He gurgles with delight.

You confide in your mother. You feel sad and overwhelmed sometimes. She gives you practical advice: Just do one thing at a time. Scrub the floor. Vacuum. Wallpaper.

You hear echoes of admonishment: Quit feeling sorry for yourself. You could be in a wheelchair.

It is another drizzling grey morning. Cars line the street outside the daycare to unload their little human cargoes, complete with backpacks and umbrellas. Organized children, organized parents begin their carefully scheduled days.

She watches the scene from the front window, where her day has also begun. Husband at work, baby back to sleep, she considers her plans for the day. Pulling the thinning terry robe up around her knees, she balances her third cup of lukewarm, overproof tea. This feels like Saturday mornings used to, but less deserved. It's only Tuesday.

Outside, the daycare rush subsides and the world slips into quiet routine. Everyone is at work or school or home. The piano strains of Peter Gzowski's "Morningside" remind her that it is now after nine and she should be doing something productive. Breakfast dishes? Laundry? Shower? Then what? She feels a little panicked – a familiar uncertainty about how to shape her day. How to defend herself from the envy she feels when her husband returns from his workday textured with deadlines nailed and missions accomplished, asking, "What did you do today?"

She'd always imagined in her work-weary other life that staying at home would be easy. At first, her days were one giant "To do" list with long and short term goals. Everything from the mundane: bake muffins, to the erudite: read Death in Venice. And of course there was that perma-goal of getting her postpartum self back into shape.

Soon, she wants more noteworthy projects. Bigger reasons to shed the housecoat early and work diligently while baby sleeps. Like those success profiles in the women's magazines she now has time to read. She could be like Lynn Johnston, creating a comic strip from her everyday experiences. Or she could write for magazines like Hope, on TV's

"thirtysomething" who explored, weekly, the same underworld of anxieties, but in drop-dead clothes and perfect hair.

A baby's cry suddenly limits her choices. Relieved, she moves into action. Drains the dregs of cold tea. Runs up the stairs. Baby's goals for the day are packed into just this moment. She can disappear into them.

The next September, you return to teaching. It is an act of self-preservation. It absolves you of the shapeless responsibility of a stay-at-home mom. You can define yourself with the clear-cut expectations of school. (Mind you, your own mother didn't return to teaching until you were in grade one. Even then she only worked mornings and was home to make lunch each day.)

Your two-year-old is thriving at a day-home with playmates and play-doh. Your husband is thriving at a new school with fun and interesting colleagues. You develop mysterious allergies that make you violently ill and cover you in hives. You begin to resent teaching. You want more time with your own child instead of everyone else's. You secretly dream of being a writer.

Your married relationship fails to thrive. There are daily disagreements about who gets to leave early for work. Who calls in sick when the baby is up all night? Whose turn is it for a night out with friends? Whose turn is it to vacuum? Whose job is more important?

You both agree on one thing. It is time for a second child. Sex can resume with this mutual goal. You are instantly successful. This time, a pink home pregnancy test

confirms the result. Any wisps of ambivalence about relationship or career are dispelled into the biosphere of your pregnant self.

With no wedding to rush or reputation to save, you can experience pregnancy on its own terms. There is the usual tiredness and morning sickness. There are routine visits to the doctor when you read Jeramy the puppy storybook again and again. He gets a sticker when your finger gets poked for blood. You can see your baby on ultrasound. These are the milestones you missed the first time around.

Your second son is born on October 30, the same day of the Clearblue test four years earlier when your life took a sharp detour. This seems to set things straight. Your life is back on track.

Your days are now spent in a Mazda minivan, driving to playschool, jazzercize, the donut shop and the children's library. You perambulate through this daytime world with other stay-at-home mothers – all of whom seem to get up earlier than you just to put on make-up and fix their hair.

You're glad to be home with your kids who become friends, despite Jeramy's initial plea to take baby Geoffrey – squalling and red faced – back to the hospital. Everyone settles into a daily routine. Your restlessness returns. You knew it would.

On a Sunday afternoon such as this your mother would have wallpapered, or vacuumed, or painted or – because it was a blue-sky warm October gift of a day, she would have raked leaves into neat piles with brisk, no-nonsense strokes. At night she would have shown you the blisters.

Your mother always worked. When the rugs had been vacuumed, the wood floors waxed and polished, the kitchen floor scrubbed, the oven foam-cleaned, the freezer scraped and vacuumed free of frost, she used the remaining time to work on a project. Home improvement, typically, but a project that could be divided into productive blocks and frequent trips to Woodward's paint department for wallpaper books, paint shaking, or brushes and rollers. (Your recent painting project of four Windsor chairs took weeks. The paintbrushes ultimately congealed into a mixture of green turpentine and bristle.)

Your mother was efficient and organized. Paintbrushes were promptly cleaned to remove all traces of paint. She fretted about her hands – scrubbing them raw with turpentine, tut-tutting over her brittle, ridged nails – but she never really let them stop working.

You remember Sunday afternoons with the Ferchuk's – how it wasn't about work and projects. Even the hunt for rose petals to make jam was fun first.

One night a week, you head out to a magazine writing course, determined to break into the world of freelance writing. Tentatively, hopefully, you mail out your first request for manuscript guidelines to *Canadian Living* magazine. It has taken three hours and ten botched envelopes to figure out the format on your computer. It is a personal victory when the guidelines arrive. You buy a book called *Magazine Writing from the Boonies* to learn more. You read it cover to cover one afternoon in the dentist's chair. You hire a babysitter one afternoon a week so you can draft query letters without interruption.

Your ideas and plans dispel your at-home ennui. Maybe you, your husband and the boys could spend the summer at a cabin on the Gulf Islands. Maybe you could write

in the morning (if he would watch the kids) and do things together in the afternoon. You know of a friend who did that so her husband could finish his thesis.

Your husband is unconvinced. "What do I get to do?" he asks.

A year later, back to teaching full time, the writing dream shelved, you hit the wall. Actually, a toy drum hits the wall because you have thrown it there as hard as you can. It joins the smashed plate and the dented bathroom door in your collection of greatest hits. You are having a tantrum. Your husband has stormed out the front door in frustration. He says you're crazy. Your children watch wide-eyed.

You wish your mother was there to pick up the pieces. She hasn't been there for a while. Over the last three years, your mother has suffered several injuries with countless complications. Torn ligaments. Detached retinas. She trips and breaks her hip at Safeway. A few months later, she slips and wrenches her back at The Bay.

You remember the July long weekend after her second hip surgery. She has just come home from the hospital and is resting in her bedroom. She is in agonizing pain but doesn't tell anyone. She asks for tea instead.

You are silently angry because she can't get up to play with your sons – her grandsons – whom you have primed for this trip all week. You need her to help you feel good about your life. To reaffirm all of your choices. To tell you to just do one thing at a time. You want to stamp your feet and make her get out of bed.

Later, you are unnerved by the number of prescription bottles in her medicine cabinet. Morphine Sulfate, Oxycocoet and Rhovane line the shelves where the Avon talcum powder and Band-aids used to be.

Your mother is in chronic pain. You have to learn to cope on your own.

You decide to consult a psychologist. It has been ten years since your last appointment. You begin with confession: "I am high strung and needy. I am never satisfied. I used to be fun."

The psychologist asks some questions and paces in front of the black leather sectional, composing his thoughts. After a few sessions, he suggests you set time aside every day for "creative visualization." You keep track of your creative thoughts and ideas in a yellow cloth bound book – a birthday gift from your mother. Inside, you are free to admit your disappointments and play with possibilities.

You begin to write your future.

The white Volkswagen Golf is parked out on the driveway, frozen solid even though the winter has been mild. There is a gaping hole in the front grill of the car where the identifying VW monogram used to be. There's a side-door divot from a close encounter with a flagpole. Rust spots re-emerge from behind peeling touch-up paint.

A huge orange tow truck chugs up alongside the car. The driver perfunctorily pops the hood and zaps the dead battery with so many volts of surrogate energy. He blasts off in a plume of white exhaust, leaving the little Volkswagen sputtering toward a rough, tentative idle.

"I'm feeling a lot like my car these days," she says as she watches the rescue through her living room window. Grey streaks of hair re-emerge from beneath fading highlights. Side door divots from two too many children. Gaping hole where her personality used to be. She imagines the bright orange truck screeching back from the corner, careening into her living room, stopping just short of the patio doors. Out jumps the cable-toting guy in a jumpsuit, smelling not unpleasantly of garages and gasoline. He walks toward her and clamps a giant red jaw onto her cranium. The black jaw grips the chintz footstool to ground. "Start her up!"

FEBRUARY 1995

I can't believe it! I got a call from a magazine editor in Toronto today. She wants to buy my "Parenting in Public" article. I kept replaying the message on my answering machine.

MAY 1995

Could I be a single parent, a teacher, a writer *and* a mower of my own lawn?

AUGUST 1995

VANCOUVER

It all began – or ended – today at the Lonsdale Market. I was waiting in a very long line-up with Jeramy to have a balloon creature made for his head. The Vancouver rain had driven every adult and child indoors.

Then I saw them. A husband and wife standing in line ahead of me. He was cradling a four- or five-month-old blonde baby who'd fallen asleep in his

arms. She was leaning just over his shoulder, her hand resting gently on his arm as they watched their older son talk to the balloon maker about his wish for a hat. The mom was smiling, eyes crinkled behind her glasses. It seemed so easy, the sharing of a nice family moment.

It made me ache for that kind of ease and enjoyment in a relationship. After I saw them, I tried holding my husband's hand. Then Geoffrey broke the umbrella because I had let him play with it. I was scolded. The afternoon was spoiled.

I wanted to cry – and did, several hours later – in the washroom stall at the McDonald's restaurant on Lonsdale Avenue.

I'm crying in washroom stalls again. I know my life is changing.

October 1995

I am planting tulip and daffodil bulbs in my garden.

I know I will not be in this house to see them when they bloom in Spring.

November 1995

I will put on my scarf and hat and go outside into the cold night air.

And I will cry because

I'm sad.

And I will ask myself what would make me happier.

And I answer, without hesitation,

Leaving him.

FEBRUARY 1996

Today would have been our seventh wedding anniversary. In the last two months, we have had to work out the details of a life we will live apart. This is scary and sad. You're not supposed to leave marriages or kids without their true parents together.

We agree to break the news to the kids one at a time. That night, before the announcement, I helped Jeramy build his new LEGO pirate ship. He was far more patient than I – proceeding carefully as I cursed the directions.

Later, Jeramy sits beside his dad on the couch and I sit opposite in the flowered chintz chair. We knew all the words and phrases we were supposed to use: "We don't love each enough to live together anymore" and "We still love you." Jeramy started to cry quietly; big tears rolled down his cheeks. We cried, too. I explained that I would be staying with a girlfriend for the next few days and his dad would stay in our house. Then, I would come back and his dad would go stay with friends. Jeramy's first concern was for his little brother." Geoffrey will miss you too much," he told me. Then, "Who will help me finish my LEGO?"

Geoffrey, three, didn't understand. He thought I was leaving for good. He clung to his blue clown blanket and his dad's leg as he watched me close the door and walk out into the wintry darkness. He still holds the memory of that night, along with the blanket.

Our children were the last to know. Word had spread quickly among family and friends – just like it had with my first pregnancy – but with starkly different reactions.

There is no need to choose sides when you're having a baby. When a marriage breaks up, one needs to stake a loyalty claim early.

My husband's parents were upset and worried for all of us. They had known there were difficulties –our conversations over countless cups of tea had shown that – but they had hoped for a smoother resolution. Now they were praying for a miracle.

I phoned my mother with the news. She was not surprised; I'd broached the subject with her months before. Her advice to me then had been trite, but the underlying message was clear: personal unhappiness is not a reason to take apart a marriage. (Wallpaper instead.)

"I have to find my own way on this," I told her over the phone. "You have no map for this part of the journey."

She sent me a long letter instead, full of abstractions about societal pressures and psychological programming. "This is not intended as a mother's homily," she wrote in her slanted, looping cursive, " but to say, were it possible I would 'fix things' so the pain and disillusionment would disappear." Her message was ambivalent. Was she apologizing for not being able to run to my rescue? Or was she saying, finally, that she trusted me to figure things out for myself?

I did ask my mother to tell my father the news. Once again, I was afraid of his derision. There had been no suppertime lectures on Divorce. The closest we kids had come to the subject was dressing up in the cast-off evening gowns of the glamorous divorcee who lived up the street. In our family, marriage meant forever.

Unmarriage

We hired a mediator to help us with our separation agreement. After several frosty sessions, we decided that the boys would spend one week with their dad, one week with their mom – an unconventional variation on joint custody. We were breaking all the rules.

I needed a place of my own. Our house seemed to belong to him now. He liked the lawn and the southern exposure. Staying there would provide stability for the kids. For me, it was strewn with ghosts of sadder times that no amount of vacuuming could clear. I packed up the furniture and housewares from my very first apartment. I took my art prints, books and a few of the kids' toys.

I rented a newer pink stucco townhouse with mint carpet and walls. In the living room, I set up my trestle desk and computer for my freelance writing, which had become a viable sideline to teaching. A few cushions were scattered on the floor in an Arabian Nights style that reminded me of the inside of the bottle on *I Dream of Jeannie.* My chintz chair and ottoman (originally my father's brown chair) sat in the corner beside a fig tree that was dying daily. In the kitchen, cardboard moving boxes waited to be unpacked into the cupboards. They never were. The kitchen window looked out onto a huge treeless expanse of yard where record-breaking snowfalls blew into high drifts. It was a bleak, Sinclair Ross winter landscape.

Upstairs there were two bedrooms for the kids and me. A slab of foam covered with my faded Marimeko sheets served as my bed. Ironically, I had no trouble sleeping there although I never moved in completely. (Maybe I could get night rates.)

For the next four months, this would be my halfway house. A place to gather the threads of a life I'd ripped apart.

Intermezzo

Sometimes the world begins
To set you up on your feet again
It wipes the tears from your eyes
How will you ever know
The way that circumstances go
Always gonna hit you by surprise. . .

"Five Days In May"
Blue Rodeo

Poem

You offer me a ride
And hand me a beer as I sit in the backseat of your truck
And I say to myself, I could love this man.

(Given the right circumstances
Which I try to create – subtly at first –
Hanging around more than usual
Staying late at seedy bars, half-listening to conversations about old movies
Until – sweet relief – you finally walk through the door)

Later, in that same red truck, you sit sideways against your door, gently shaking your head as I try to nudge the circumstances along.

I get to hold you, finally, under the polite guise of a last dance, where we both seem to be at a convenient loss for partners. I lean into you and am completely content.

The next morning, we drink coffee at a donut shop. Your ball cap is tugged low on your forehead. You look thirteen.

I watch you by the fire at a friend's place. I learn to love your voice, your laughter, and your stories.

And later, on a snowy country road, over coffee, "American Pie" and slow gentle kisses, I touch your face. I remember your eyes.

I meet you against a backdrop of water and blue sky and mountains in a place I have known forever.

And I realize I love you.

Letter

I remember when I was travelling in England about ten summers ago, and had just visited Warwick Castle. It was the regular castle tour: climb to the ramparts, see the instruments of torture in the dungeon. But the most haunting memory I have of that day was of another castle nearby called Kenilworth.

It was one of those English misty, damp days that seemed typical of my whole summer there. Kenilworth rose in the mist with this pinkish coloured stone that was beautiful against the green hedgerows. But this castle was all overgrown and seemed to be missing its top half. Our tour guide explained that Kenilworth had been used as a sort of upside-down quarry for neighbouring Warwick Castle, that its stones had been the foundation for the grandeur of the other.

I began thinking about our respective marriages and the image of that ruined castle kept coming to mind. Equally disturbing was the image of taking stones from that old castle to lay the foundation for a new one. There are some stones I don't want carried over.

As I find myself rushing headlong into creating a new castle, I want to slow down enough to be sure. I want to begin this castle with a new cornerstone – patience.

Third Attempt:

Going Solo

I threw my wedding dress in a dumpster.

The dress had been sliding back and forth inside the trunk of my car since I'd left. When the jug of windshield washer fluid tipped, leaking bright pink splotches onto ivory satin, it murdered any chance of that dress reinventing itself in some consignment store.

I, however, was reinventing myself.

Official househunting began later that year in May, 1996. The lawyers had worked out the financial details of our settlement and I'd soon have some money to put toward a house of my own. I chose my realtor carefully. Paula was in her late forties, divorced and had a graduate degree in nursing administration. I needed female energy and wisdom (other than my mother's) for all phases of this move.

Paula set up her laptop so I could scroll through on-screen displays of Red Deer properties. I said I wanted a character home with hardwood floors that would be big enough for my kids but small enough for me to manage. Mature trees and a mid-sized yard in a quiet, stable neighbourhood would be just right.

I was looking for Kingsland.

Paula picked me up in her 4x4 truck – not a typical realtor's vehicle –where we discussed divorce and healing and *Women Who Run With the Wolves* as we travelled from place to place.

The first house had a nice yard but a dark, dank (scary) basement. The second had hardwood floors but the bathroom needed work. The third, a duplex, was new and modern but the yard was tiny and the street too busy.

Back in Paula's truck, I started to cry. This was all so hard. Looking for a house on my own. Taking care of it on my own. Being on my own.

I'd chosen it all.

On a sunny day near the end of June, I made an offer on a small white house with green trim that was just right. I stepped into the front entryway and said, "I'll buy it."

There were hardwood floors (the Johnson paste-wax kind) that led into a cozy living room with an east-facing window alcove and a built-in china cabinet. There were two bright bedrooms upstairs and a newly renovated bathroom with a pedestal sink. A narrow kitchen with tall white cupboards looked out onto a large wooden deck and back yard with an enormous poplar tree. The basement had been finished in panelboard and Berber carpet with a rumpus room, office area and spare bedroom.

The house was furnished with antiques and flea market finds in various stages of refinishing; it felt inviting and calm. It had belonged to a divorced woman raising two teenage daughters on her own. After the sale had gone through, she asked me over for coffee. This had been her healing house, she said. It would become mine.

The neighbourhood was called Mountview. Every other week, my two sons would come to live with me.

Our neighbourhood
Has tiny bungalows and
One-and-a-half storey houses with steep sloped roofs
That people call wartime
A strip of street from the 1950's
Where trees arch and meet in the centre
Old-fashioned trees like mountain ash, Mayday, weeping birch
None of them tethered to stakes in the ground
To keep from blowing over.

Our neighbourhood
Has power lines that crisscross overhead
To streetlights on ancient timber poles
On little postage-stamp front lawns
But backyards stretch forever

Our neighbourhood
Has flowers perennially
Irises, peonies, Icelandic poppies
Volunteer each spring
Dandelions
Grow in the back lane
Around derelict cars
Beside wooden garages with curled shingles
Through fences that lean
And go gracefully to seed

In our neighbourhood
No one worries about fertilizing
Early
Or watering
Daily
Or mowing
Weekly
Dew worms live in these old lawns
Bumpy and hard

In our neighbourhood
Leaves fall into a sea of yellow
We rake them into piles for
Jumping

On Sunday afternoons
When the air is warm and hazy
And smells like smoke

In our neighbourhood
Snowplows make windrows
We climb, slide
And push each other off
Hear the scrape of skates and sticks
From the rink across the street
That melts each spring into a soggy baseball diamond
Beside the park with a Blue Imp slide

In our neighbourhood
Kids play road hockey
Sometimes cars drive through too fast
(Evidently not from
our neighbourhood)
Old men wear plaid shirts and suspenders
They smoke pipes and talk about the flood of '64 where the streets filled with water so high
Boats floated
In our neighbourhood
We have mailboxes on our houses
And mailmen who walk up to each house to slide mail in
In our neighbourhood
There are symphony conductors and hairdressers
Librarians and oil riggers
Ice climbers and bus drivers
And widows who remember when
Our neighbourhood
Was new.

I decided – decreed – that my children would have a golden childhood like mine, despite my marriage break-up. I had the setting, props and costumes (name brands only) ready. My cast of characters – two well-adjusted boys and their iconoclastic single mom – would roll through a script of adventures and scrapes that all worked out in the end.

I hadn't counted on late night trips to the emergency room, basement floods or the major demands of two kids playing minor hockey. Family dinners often became the

drive-thru at McDonald's. Potato chips became the perfect after-school snack. After a day of teaching, I gratefully relinquished my children to an evening of video games and movies.

I hadn't counted on my kids' lack of appreciation. I drove them to countless hockey games where their only thanks was a snarl that I tied their skates too loose. I planned creative birthday parties and conjured magic each Christmas only to crash immediately after the events. I worried about money constantly. The rising costs of the kids' activities and maintaining their standard of living weighed heavily against my own decision to write more and teach less.

I hadn't counted on my ex's relentless criticism – bitter attacks launched suddenly during phone conversations, on front porches and in school parking lots. In my original post-marriage script he'd been cast as a benevolent walk-on. Now, he required an entire scene complete with dramatic monologue.

Ex Post Facto[1]

Me
Your devoted ex-husband
Feels the time has come to tell you
That every Thursday
We have been meeting
As a group
To discuss your personal
Flaws
Shortcomings
Failings
In an effort to
Make you a
Better person.

Your ex-closest-confidante speaks first
About how you never told her you were
Involved
With her other ex-good friend
Even as you slept in her home
Between houses of your own
But she's out of time
Because there's a full roster tonight.

Here's another ex-friend
Who was forced
Through early morning coffee after early morning swims
To choose me
Instead of you
For my fun-loving nature
My easy relaxed fit
(In jeans as well as swim trunks)

All your ex-friends have noted my superior parenting
Consistent discipline
Nutritious meals
Regular bedtimes
They have observed my impeccable housekeeping
Floors are never sticky
Rugs are vacuumed weekly
I never miss a rinse cycle

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[1] This poem is modelled on an excerpt from the poem "We Who Are Your Closest Friends" by Phillip Lopate, quoted in Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*. 10-11.

I am sensible with money
So we talk
(for a moment)
About how you'll never have enough
To pay your debts to me
Larking about on undeserved sabbaticals
So you can be a writer
You who are so good with words
Charlatan
We despise you
But I digress.
It's someone else's turn.

Next up are your ex-in-laws
They know who you are now
Because I keep them informed
They were dazzled
By your friendliness, your conversations
Drinking tea and eating Welsh cakes on lazy summer mornings
Accomplishing nothing
They have some vague nostalgia about the person you pretended to be
Over tea
My mother cries at the memory
Look at the pain you caused her
They have nothing to add
At this time
Because I have said it all for them

Your own mother risked life and limb to be here
Nearly slipped on the icy sidewalk
Thank God for a cane with spikes
To lean into her pain
Or stab your character
She is the one who entrusted me
With your care and growth
Like a plant with a cardboard care card
High needs. High hopes. High maintenance.
Ground daily.
(God knows, Pat, I've never stopped her from growing)

There's still a number waiting to speak
His ex-wife has never met you but has stitched up this scarlet letter "A" for you to wear
In public
Presumption?
No matter.
We need this to be your fault.

Your ex-psychologist wonders why you didn't take Prozac and avoid this entire mess

There are e-mails, too
From ex-students who say you took too long marking their essays
From ex-colleagues who –
Darn
We're out of time
We'll meet again next Thursday.

Most of all, I hadn't counted on my own limits. Exhausted and frustrated, I was more often wicked stepmother than fairy godmother, given to tantrums and repeating "I hate this" like a mantra. The kids, eyes downcast, would wait for the storm to pass.

What I don't want
Is to be a single parent
Forever
Carving routine and structure
Single-handedly
Out of days that begin with cartoons
Or Nintendo
And need to go somewhere else eventually
To parks or bike rides
Memory builders. Kodak moments.
And summer vacations
Where I have to pitch my own tent
(If I borrow one)
And light my own camp stove
(If I borrow one)
To create that family feeling
That I left the family to find
It's up to me

Alone
(A-parent-ly)
Trying to meet a golden standard of perfection
That only exists in
Memory.

There were golden moments I never anticipated. There were bike rides through shaded Waskasoo trails, swimming pools on hot afternoons and the comfortable silences of highway drives. We triumphed over wasps' nests, ant infestations and a windstorm that buried the yard with broken branches.

There was that moment on my deck one warm April night. I was staring at the moon, listening to distant wind chimes, learning to live with some suspense.

I'd managed on my own for two years when I had a breakdown, of sorts, in Superstore one Sunday.

A display of Pyrex glassware was stacked in the centre aisle. I'd noticed this only because one dish had fallen and smashed seconds earlier. I could see another baking pan lining up for the same fate. Sliding. I didn't move to grab it, frozen by indecision. "Everyone will think I caused it," I thought. "They'll blame me for the whole mess. What if they make me pay for it?" I turned away, feigning a sudden interest in Ziploc freezer bags. I heard a smash behind me, then another. I glanced over my shoulder at the heap of Pyrex shards.

The message, however metaphoric, was obvious. In my quest for personal happiness and satisfaction, I was destroying everyone else's.

Guilt had arrived. I stood accused in the fluorescent glare.

I. Guilty of ruining the emotionally stable, economically secure family life my kids could have had.

(I shamefully recall our recent family outing to see the Calgary Philharmonic's production of "Beethoven Lives Upstairs." Since I'd given up on Jeramy's piano lessons, I thought this would be excellent enrichment. We hastily make preparations for the event. Jeramy has no dress pants that fit; the legs end just above his ankles. What's wrong with jeans, he'd like to know. Geoff's runners have no laces; the tongues splay in sloppy defiance. The boys slump down in their seats in the concert hall, their shaggy hair just sprung from reluctantly removed ball caps. I poke them to sit up straight and hiss at them to keep quiet. They cheer loudly when the performance ends. "That was so boring," they agree. Beside me sits my friend with her attentive husband and three impeccably dressed, well-mannered boys with an appreciation for Beethoven.

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.)

II. Guilty of jumping too soon into a "rebound" relationship that – experts warn – will fail.

(I admit it. I was trying to build this new relationship slowly, but my hopes raced wildly ahead. The two of us took long drives in the country to look at acreage lots (his dream) with a writerly view (my dream). We talked late into the night about where we could travel and where I could write. We hiked and cycled and canoed into places I'd never been. We spoke about blending our families with a "Yours, Mine and Ours" happy ending. Conflicts erupted on fault lines that were eerily familiar. I wanted commitment; he wanted time. Time to work out his feelings about leaving his own marriage. Time to

figure out a way to see more of his son. His indecision scared me. We kept looking at acreages anyway, building castles in the sky.)

III. Guilty of betraying my parents' best hopes.

(My father thinks that I don't like men in general and seems perplexed – even insulted – by my behaviour. My mother is hurt by my aloof silence after years of intimate chitchat. I am frustrated every time I go back to the Kingsland house we shared – once a sanctuary. Now it exerts this gravitational pull that I struggle out of after every visit.

The immaculate house with the well-stocked fridge is poised for family gatherings of three daughters, two current sons-in-law and six grandsons. A huge family photo, taken over a decade ago, dominates the living room wall. Another photo series of our teenage selves in profile, like three Breck shampoo girls, is arranged on the dining room wall. A glass vase of brackish water filled with curling dieffenbachia roots sits on the tea wagon. My wedding picture still hangs by the entryway. Bride and groom, best man, maid of honour and two sets of parents stand smiling in front of the faux marble fireplace. Is this nostalgia or sabotage? I ask my mother when she plans to take the picture down – the wedding and marriage being long since over. She responds snarkily as a teenager, "It's my house, I'll do what I want."

"Thanks for validating the last two years of my life," I reply and hang the picture upside down in passive Ghandi-like resistance – a symbolic statement of how my life, since that time, has shifted direction dramatically. Mom snidely offers to hang a black cloth over it. I suggest she substitute her own wedding portrait, stashed away in some bureau drawer. At least her marriage exists.)

IV. Guilty of avoiding church. The God who lives there knows my story, had such high hopes, and is very disappointed. I'm afraid to sit in the wooden pew – surrounded by close-knit, nuclear families – and call to mind my sins.

(In my defense, I did seek a fresh spiritual experience one Sunday at the United Church. People chatted across the pews and their children clambered over the top and beneath. They would have been frozen on the spot by my mother's icy glares travelling several pew lengths. What was this bread and grape juice ritual and why was a four-year-old in line ahead of me? It was all too casual. Not enough holy icons or stained glass. No redolence of incense. And the pastor, with his pregnant wife in the front pew, was much too young and virile.)

Going to church is like going to my mother's house. I will always be a child – flustered by adult responsibilities, incapable of making good decisions. I try to avoid both places for awhile. It's no use.

My implacable ten-year-old mapmaking self has taken me down in Superstore in a barrage of Pyrex glass.

I have no right to be happy.

Suddenly, I am afraid to go anywhere by myself. The fear rises up during solitary walks or nights when the kids are away. Its tentacles twist around me when I drive alone on highways that I've driven comfortably for years. Anxiety has become my punishment.

It is a blue sky winter day. Highway 2, bare and dry, stretches straight ahead of me. I shift into fifth gear and set the cruise control, ready to enjoy the solo drive.

I feel a sudden chill. A shiver of uneasiness. My face flushes. My palms sweat on the steering wheel. I reach for that next breath. I can't fill my lungs with enough air. My heart pounds in my ears. The edges of my vision blur. The prairie landscape outside the windshield is surreal and unfamiliar.

What's happening?

Turn on the radio. Sing. Open the window. Breathe.

You're hyperventilating. What if you pass out? What if you crash?

I scan the highway for a friendly green sign. Twenty kilometers to the next town. There's a gas station by the overpass. I can pull in there if I have to.

And what? Panic completely? Sob hysterically? Run shrieking onto the highway?

I'm afraid to keep driving. I'm more afraid to stop.

You're going crazy. You're going to end up like that woman with agoraphobia who had to be moved to her new house across town in a travel trailer. You're going off the deep end.

A few days later, I'm at my doctor's office. I'm feeling strange, I tell her. Every time I drive farther than the city limits, I get these weird sensations. Kind of breathless. Sort of dizzy. Pretty scared. Like I might lose control.

The doctor asks about my work, the kids, the marriage that she knows is over. I'd always sensed that she hoped for reconciliation. Maybe she thinks this is a sign that I should go back to where I belong.

She prescribes a relaxant – something to get me over this hump. It's very mild, she assures me. I take the prescription paper, scrawled with symbols and NO REPEATS. Slowly, I walk downstairs to the clinic pharmacy.

I'm the only customer in the store. The pharmacist greets me in a familiar way. He's filled my prescriptions before. He hesitates as he gives me the package, "You need to smile more," he says, then squeezes my shoulder.

He never does that when he gives me penicillin. I am instantly suspicious of the tiny green pills. I read: *"Long-term or excessive use of this medication can cause dependency."* Now I'm scared. "*Use caution while driving...*" I start to laugh. So much for reducing my anxiety on the road.

I flush the Ativan down the toilet. I buy a cell phone instead.

I'm still afraid of the responsibility a day alone with me gives. Sometimes I cry, aching with wistfulness. Part of me wants to confide in my mother and feel safe again. *There be dragons.*

I write about my fears instead.

I have always been afraid.

I was afraid of the dark.

I was afraid of getting lost.

I was afraid of strangers with beards because they could be kidnappers.

I was afraid of waterfalls, spillways and hydrodams – my father's favourite point of interest on summer holidays. They terrified but held me, spellbound, in their rush and force and spray.

I was afraid of the deep end of the swimming pool.

By night, I was afraid of the Nancy Drew books with their yellow spines and suspense-filled covers that lined my closet shelf. By day, I ached to borrow more Nancy Drew books at my piano teacher's house.

I was afraid to ask her. Her dad had just died and there was sadness in that house.

I was sometimes afraid of my dad. His gruff, gravelly voice. His prickly beard on the rare occasions when he kissed us good night.

I was afraid of car rides in winter. Driving with my mother scared me in every season.

I was afraid of being late. (In this part of my life, I am always early.)

I would wait for my best friend Karen as the time to leave for school stretched past, a sick feeling rising in my stomach at the thought of being late, or worse, walking the distance to school by myself.

I was not afraid of school. (My fingernails are clean. I have remembered a peach chiffon hankie from my mother's dresser drawer to lay my hands upon for inspection. I print carefully and read my stories with expression. We draw pictures of what we want to be when we grow up and I choose a nun. I work for days on the rosary my picture nun wears around her neck. She has a bright yellow halo with rays like the sun. When I am a grown-up I will be brave.)

I am a grown-up afraid to be alone.

I feel the fear rise in tingling palms and dizzy head as I drive on sunshine highways in a red Jeep I bought to keep me safe. A Jeep that could make it through snow and blizzards and four-wheel drive across my interior terrain of fears. What if I get lost? What if no one knows who I am? What if I end up alone?

Nancy Drew, the attractive, slim, titian-haired, blue-eyed, eighteen-year-old, alighted from her blue convertible roadster, walking over to the red Jeep that had suddenly pulled over onto the shoulder of Highway 2.

"Do you require some assistance?" she inquired. "I saw that you pulled over rather suddenly."

The middle-aged woman behind the wheel looked distraught and disheveled in her baggy grey sweatsuit, unable to respond to Nancy, dressed in a fetching pink sheath dress with matching pumps.

"Is someone pursuing you?" Nancy asked. "A stranger or a kidnapper? A sinister man with a beard?"

"No. Nothing like that," the woman finally answered, her face flushed with embarrassment. "I just feel this weird anxiety every time I find myself alone – especially when I'm driving on the highway. So I stopped to pull myself together. It's a mystery to me," she added wanly.

"I can't pass up a good mystery," smiled Nancy, her blue eyes sparkling in keen interest. She'd been wondering when her next mystery would come along; her first had been <u>The Secret of the Old Clock.</u>

"I haven't got many clues for you to go on, Nancy," the woman answered sheepishly. "I'm not much of a detective. In fact, I'm afraid of most of the scenes on the

covers of your books. The Ghost of Blackwood Hall I found particularly chilling. Mind you, your best friends – the slightly plump Bess Marvin and the trim, boyish George Fayne – were on the cover with you."

Nancy laughed, "Most of the people in River Heights who ask me for help have no clue either." She patted the woman's hand solicitously. "You poor dear."

The woman bristled. "How is it that you were older than me when I read all your books and, suddenly, I'm twenty years older than you? Don't you ever go to college, move away, marry Ned Nickerson and have kids like the Bobbsey twins?"

The young sleuth did not respond, her eyes darting instinctively around the Jeep, looking for clues. Go-cups and fast food wrappers suggested untidy children with poor eating habits.

"Nancy, the mystery I need you to solve is this: Why do I feel so anxious on my own? I worry that I might be going crazy."

"I've never solved a psychological mystery," Nancy responded ruefully. "Just the usual flimflammers around River Heights: counterfeiters, jewel thieves, pickpockets, racketeers. Sometimes my sleuthing takes me to Scotland, New Orleans, or Hawaii, hot on the trail of a mystery."

"I often wondered how you could afford all those trips," the woman said wryly. "Seriously, Nancy, I can hardly travel around Alberta these days. I feel uneasy and I want to know why. Can you help me?"

Nancy frowned, deep in thought.

"Is there some horribly traumatic event in your past?" queried the young detective. "Have you, for instance, ever stepped into a quagmire? Been abducted on a

mini submarine? Been chloroformed by racketeers posing as mediums?" She paused and pursed her lips. "Could it be that your mother died when you were three and you've been shoving your grief down and acting perfect all these years just to please your father, the brilliant criminal lawyer Carson Drew who believes that your kindly housekeeper Hannah Gruen and her endless egg salad sandwiches is a reasonable substitute for a mother? Did you ever feel anything like that?"

"N-no," the woman stammered, taken aback by the young sleuth's outburst.

"I don't ever remember losing my presence of mind like that," Nancy thought to herself, "I must be tired or famished – although that's usually Bess's problem. I must keep cool." She shook off the feeling and implored the woman to continue.

"Please go on. Your story has piqued my curiosity."

"I had a fairly normal childhood," the woman replied. "But I do have a sense that this anxiety is connected to my mother."

"You have an intuition – a hunch is what we amateur sleuths call it," Nancy interjected.

"Yes, I suppose that's it. I just wonder if I feel anxious because I'm making different choices than my mother did. It almost seems like I'm betraying her. Without her approval, I'll fail at everything.

"I've never failed at anything!" Nancy responded cheerfully.

"I know," the woman groaned. "But you're a fictional character – a fairly static one at that. You never change. You never grow."

She observed a troubled expression come over Nancy's pretty features.

"I would love to solve your mystery but I now realize I don't have a clue about my own mother," Nancy said, chagrined. "Frankly, I need to get a message to that distinguished father of mine."

"Would you like to use my cell phone?"

"There may be eavesdroppers. I'll use Morse code instead."

Nancy hurried back to her convertible and sped away, failing to signal and darting dangerously into highway traffic.

"That girl is going to get her license revoked," mused the woman in the Jeep as she watched the roadster become a blue dot on the highway.

Nancy Drew careened toward her next baffling mystery. She would never be the same.

I have to solve my mystery alone.

Did I betray my mother by growing up? Is that where the fear begins?

The Clue in the Old Album

May 1960

I am looking at a scallop-edged black and white photo of my sister Robin and me, just a baby, in the rocking chair. I am dressed in a lace baptism gown and crocheted cap. Robin is wearing a grey wool coat and a matching bonnet tied under her chin. The coat is familiar; it will be handed down to me. We must be looking at our mother, who I'm sure is the photographer, staring down into her Kodak Brownie camera and telling us to smile.

We wait for the pop of the flashbulb and the smell of burning glass. In this picture, I'm too young to know any of that. I see a flash, hear a pop and blink white spots afterward. If I cry, my mother will hold me.

Christmas 1961

Here's Mom and her three little girls in front of the Christmas tree. We are dressed in new white smock tops with treble clefs embroidered on each. (Odd how my smock has only two treble clefs, not three. Mom must have run out of embroidery floss – or time.) Kim stands beside the tree – an angelic expression on her face – as if she could burst into "Carol of the Bells" any minute. Robin is the only one smiling, cherub-like. My mother sits on the floor beside her, leaning on one arm. Her other arm is wrapped tightly around Kim's legs. Mom is dressed in a smart tartan dress and her hair looks nice. The camera has caught her looking sternly at me; I can be an unpredictable subject.

I hold my new Maggie doll by the arm, frowning at the photographer, who must be Dad, out of the picture.

Maybe not entirely. There's my favourite Christmas ornament hanging on the tree – a small gold saxophone.

August 1963

Here's Mom and her girls again on the porch of Wagon Wheel Motel in Radium, BC. She is wearing the green and white checkered short set that officially heralded our summer family holiday. Her hair is curly, which indicates a summer perm, and she squints into the sun as she leans on the railing above us.

Kim squints through her pink cat's eye glasses. A new inflatable swan circles her waist. Robin has an inflatable Sammy Seal and leans back proudly to show him off. Her uneven bangs suggest a recent trim by Mom with tape and shears. So do mine – bleach blonde and hopelessly crooked. I am squeezing my new yellow seahorse that squeaks.

August 1964

This photo was taken in Jasper. I am sitting alone on the riverbank, one knee pulled up to my chest, unaware of any camera. I have been told to tie my own saddle shoes (grade one would be starting soon) and to hurry up. Mom, my usual rescuer, is nowhere in sight. I remember the panic that gripped me there on the rocks. Sock-footed with my shoelaces in knots, I was going to be left alone with the bears.

Whoever took this photo intended it for the grown-up they trusted I would become. I sense it was my father – although it could have been my mother, before she realized that growing up would mean growing apart.

The Secret(s) of the Wooden Lady

I am running late
My mother is not.
She waits in the foyer of the Cheesecake Café

(One-time JB's Big Boy Restaurant
Where our family used to go for Sunday breakfasts
Of waffles with strawberries and whipped cream)

She is there, leaning slightly on her copper cane
In a crisp black blazer and new haircut.
I notice, then apologize for arriving late.
(In this part of my life – I am never early)
I sigh over the clatter of the restaurant
Wishing I'd found a place with more history.

(Like the Woodward's Macleod Room with desserts pictured on the tent cards on tables
Overlooking the fountains below.
Or at the lunch counter at Kresge's where the stools swivel.
Grape juice splashes inside glass Jet Stream coolers.
Butter tarts and slices of pie sit beneath glass domes.
There's nothing left of the places where we used to eat.)

We skim the menu of choices for lunch.
I'm drinking coffee. She's drinking water.
We talk of nothing in particular and order an appetizer combination
To share.

Between bites of artichoke,
(Start to choke)
I ask for permission
"I'd like to write your story."
And rush to explain how I'm writing my own,
Weaving subplots of childhood, moving out, marriage, divorce
Into a larger drama that I now see as design
Not chance.

Surely her life has stories like this.

Instantly the shields come up.
"Why do you need to do this?
My past is not particularly interesting."
(Besides)
"You never ask about my life now."
(The one that is displayed on the memo board on her fridge? To-do lists, calendars, phone numbers, medication reminders…)

She assures me that, at 75, she's dealt with all the disappointments in her life.
Worked her issues.
She tosses words in from the books she reads
Boundaries, spirituality, on the same page
She will not go to other places with older words
Fear, loss, shame, abandonment.

She is not honoured by this request
She is irritated
And doubts my motives
She's thinking *Mommie Dearest*
I'm hoping for *The Joy Luck Club.*

A month goes by before she agrees.

I am surprisingly confident researching someone else's life story – especially one with such dramatic potential. I schedule interviews, prepare questions and take notes in spiral bound notebooks, just like a magazine feature. I ask Mom for mementos of her life before I knew her. She gives me things secular (a photo album, autograph books, newspaper articles about her teaching innovations) and things sacred (holy cards, a Scapular and her Saint Andrew Daily Missal). I draft timelines and separate her life into phases that she has titled: The Beginning (1922-42); The Teaching Years (1944-54); The At-Home Years (1954-66); Teaching Re-entry and "Post-Legitimate" Years, after she earned her B.Ed, (1966-1988); The Retirement Years (1988 – present day).

The early phases are the most compelling to me – the stories of her as a child, teenager and young woman – and I probe for details. My mother finds this bothersome, as though she would have preferred to skip growing up entirely, springing – like Athena – as a fully formed, self-actualized adult.

I piece together a childhood that was happy until her father left. There was the Christmas with no presents and the summer of the repossessed new red bicycle. There was a rundown apartment with a landlord who leered and a part time job with a storeowner who groped. There was a proud, determined mother who worked long hours while her oldest daughter babysat, cooked and cleaned. My grandmother, Nan, struggled and rose again from the ashes of my own mother's childhood.

The Ghosts of Cambridge Court

I decide that a trip to Saskatoon might galvanize my writing by linking actual places with people and events from Mom's past. She has refused my invitation to come. "Why would I want to go back there?"

I invite a friend along for company. (I am a writer who is afraid to be alone.)

I stay at the Bessborough Hotel and walk along Spadina Crescent for a sense of my mother's world. Duke Street. Queen Street. Princess Street. King Street. She had a childhood kingdom of her own. One afternoon, I discover – by accident – the place where she lived until she was ten. Cambridge Court is an elegant, honey-coloured brick apartment block, now designated a heritage building. Mom's past has survived in spite of her.

The resident manager is vacuuming the red carpet. He is thin and hunched over, wearing a faded plaid shirt. Lank black hair falls across his forehead. He looks to be in his fifties. The cell phone strapped to his belt puts him squarely in the nineties. He invites us to take a look around. A graceful marble staircase leads up to the foyer and faux fireplace. Through curved archways, I see dark wooden doors with brass numbers.

I make a quick call on my own cell-phone to Mom back in Calgary.

"I'm standing inside Cambridge Court," I tell her, feeling intrepid.

"What on earth are you doing there?"

"Primary research. Which number did you live in?"

There is a pause. "B-11."

"B-11 has a tenant," the resident manager tells me apologetically, "but you can take a look at my place, if you don't mind the mess."

He points out relics from the past. The kitchen cupboards, eating nook (see how the benches lift up?) and plaster ceilings are original. Same with the hardwood floors, light fixtures and bathroom tile. I take his word on bedroom originality when I glimpse the Playboy centrefold pinned above his bed. A portrait of Princess Di hangs on the kitchen wall. Photos of grandkids sit beside a full ashtray on top of the TV.

I try to imagine my mother, my grandmother and grandfather in this place. Did Nan wear her bright red lipstick and smoke DuMauriers back then? Mom says her father was Jimmy Stewart handsome – slim and tall with dark thick hair. They made such a good-looking couple.

What were Saturdays like at Cambridge Court in 1933?

She is afraid
Of walks down Duke Street
To find her father
In The Senator beer parlour
Drinking with his buddies
On Saturday afternoons

She is afraid
Of the arguments afterward
Harsh words from the living room
She puts the pillow over her head

Tries to sleep

Remembering sled rides and a dog named Sammy.

"The laundry room is real old," says the manager. We follow the smell of fabric softener through a basement labyrinth. Two steel washtubs are flanked by newer appliances. Was I expecting washboards and wringer washers? A clothesline spans the length of the room. There are brown water stains on the ceiling. The afternoon light is grey through the narrow window.

Another hallway leads to the storage room, damp and smelling of mildew. A row of wooden lockers with metal hasps and white stenciled numbers line the far wall. Present-day bicycles and bed frames lean beside them. A brass bound steamer trunk – just like one at Mom's house – sits in the corner.

She is afraid

Her father has lost his job

They have to move from this place

To another

Then another

To an old house with peeling paint and creaking floors

And dark spaces shared by strangers

Big, burly, dangerous.

"I'll show you the furnace room," says the manager. Fire dances and hisses in a huge steel drum that takes up all the space. The boiler hangs above us; yellow asbestos

leaks out of a gash. The manager calls this his workshop. I suddenly think of Bluebeard and crazy people – real ones – who lock women away in dark subterranean chambers just like this. Thankfully, I am not alone with the manager, this wiry Hephaestus with his metal and heat.

She is afraid
Her father has gone away
Her mother is very sick
Each night, the girl walks alone to the corner near City Hospital
And waits for her mother to appear in the second floor window.
A ghost waving. Or an angel.
She walks home again
Making promises.
When she is a mother,
She will never leave.
She will never leave her children
Alone.

I return from Saskatoon hungry for more real life details and drama – preferably with deus ex machina resolutions. I have my next set of interview questions ready.

Q: How did you feel when you accidentally discovered that you had been adopted?

A: Shocked, I suppose. Confused. I didn't talk to Nan about it for a long time.

Q: Did you ever meet your birth mother?

A: We met once when I was seventeen. I don't remember much about her.

Q: Did you ever fall completely, head over heels, in love? (Perhaps with a man destined for the priesthood?)

A: That's none of your business.

Q: Did you have dream of being anything other than a teacher? (An actress, maybe a lawyer?)

A: Yes, I did. In fact, after I'd taught for a few years, I entered a contest – on a lark – to be a commentator for a new women's radio show at Station CKOM in Saskatoon. The original winner couldn't accept the job and since I was the first runner up, I got it. I liked the radio world – the story meetings, the live interviews – but the pressure was unbelievable. I got sick – serious enough to be hospitalized – and had to quit after just a few months. I went back to teaching for the Department of National Defence in Fort Nelson BC, then North Bay, where I met your father.

Q: Why does it say on my birth certificate that you gave birth to four, not three, children? (Perhaps there's an untold story here?)

A: That's odd. It must be a typographical error.

Our interview wraps up early. "Her life must have been less eventful than you thought," Dad observes.

He was right. Mom's life story had been much better in my imagination.

Mother Superior calls Patsy Murphy into her office late one afternoon in May. The air inside is hot and smells like the musty pages of prayer books. Behind her rosewood desk, Mother Lilian speaks.

"What are your plans for grade twelve, my child?"

"To continue here at The Academy of Sion," Patsy answers, then quickly adds, "My mother needs me at home to take care of my little brother and sister. She works long shifts at the train station."

"I know your mother relies on you, Patsy but I wonder if you might give something I'm going to suggest some thought."

Patsy sits, twisting her fingers, and waits.

"The Holy Family Convent in Rosetown is one of the finest girls' schools in this province. It has the highest standards for academics as well as music and physical education," Mother Lilian explains. "In light of your academic standing here at Sion, Patsy, I encourage you to consider Rosetown for your graduating year. You would be a boarder there, of course, but you could come home for visits on weekends and holidays."

"Of course," Patsy thinks she hears herself say.

Inside her head, she is already there. Boarding school! Tartan kilts with white blouses and vests. Choirs, clubs, Rosetown chums. Miles away from the shabby North

Park bungalow. Worlds away from housekeeping and babysitting and endless responsibilities.

"And, of course, it is an opportunity to study within a community of holy sisters – Brides of Christ. I suggest this to you, Patsy, because not only are you an excellent student, but I believe that you are being called upon by our dear Lord to make some choices."

"I am?"

"Not this minute, of course, but you are seventeen, Patsy. The road is rising up to greet you."

Patsy rushes home to North Park. The house is empty. The kids must still be at school. Mother Lilian says there will be documents needed for registration: birth and baptismal certificates, health records.

Where does her mother keep those kinds of things? Patsy flips the clasp on the steamer trunk and pulls up. Nothing much inside. Just a brown envelope with some papers. She rifles through them, looking for official details.

"Province of Manitoba: Registration of Adoption."

Patsy sees her name printed there in the space labelled "full name of child." Jane Gordon is printed beside "full name of mother before Marriage." The form is incomplete – no dates or signatures appear at the end. The story of Patricia Ann Gordon is unfinished business.

It will be weeks before Patsy admits her discovery. "You shouldn't have been snooping," is her mother's angry response. "It is none of your business."

Patsy feels her own hot rage. She wants to shake the secrets from this woman. Slap the lies from her red lipstick mouth. "This is all my business!" she wants to scream. Each word followed by a fist of knuckles smashed into cheek and jawbone. This – Is – Who – I – Am.

She says nothing. Does nothing. After a while, she feels nothing.

Patsy pins a large velvet bow in her hair and examines the effect in the mirror. She looks twelve – convincing enough to pay a child's fare on the bus to Winnipeg. She is travelling alone to meet her real mother. Her mother – stepmother? – has softened and arranged a meeting.

They will have lunch
At The Chocolate Shop
Or some tonier spot
That is no longer there
And talk of
Nothing in particular
Blank faces
Blank spaces from
Birth to seventeen
"Are you an artist?" the mother will ask.
"What are your plans?" the mother will ask.
That will be all
The daughter recalls.

(I want to interrupt their conversation now,
The Ghost of Luncheons Future
The Writer of Mother Stories
The Miner of the Motherlode
I have a few burning questions, Miss Jane Gordon.
Bank teller, mistress, unwed mother of mystery
Who are you? Who is the father? Where did this happen? Why did you do this?
How do you feel about it now?

Their conversation continues mutely
Blankly.
I can only speculate
A spectator
A spectre)

"Are you an artist?" her mother asks, leaning her elbows on the table, fingers laced beneath her chin. Her brown eyes are warm and gentle.

"No," her daughter answers, smiling a little. "I can't draw a straight line with a ruler." She pauses, then adds, "I've taken piano lessons for eight years. Highland dance and tap, too. I sing in the school choir – but I'm not that good."

"Then you are an artist after all," her mother laughs. "What are your plans when you finish high school?"

"I'll probably go to Normal School in Saskatoon, then teach," her daughter says, hesitating. "I've thought about becoming a nun, but Mom says she'll throw herself in the South Saskatchewan River if I do. She thinks I should be a secretary; they get to meet lots of people."

"But what do you really want to do?"

This question has never been asked but Patsy already knows the answer.

"I want my own radio show."

"You can do anything you set your mind to," her mother reassures. "You can do anything."

Epilogue

Forty-two years after I was born, I left the womb for good. It seemed that writing about my life – and my mother's – allowed me to trust the adult inside.

I now recognize in my mother the indignant, determined ten-year-old who vowed to never leave her children alone. I understand the dutiful teenager who hid her own feelings to protect her mother. I know that young, promising teacher who would give it all up for a radio show.

What I don't know is the sad, frail and lonely woman that my mother has become. The mother who protected me from all bumps and falls seems to be mourning our old relationship. She is the one with insomnia now. And I, adult and apart, mourn through my anxiety.

I wish my writing could build a new relationship between us, as two adults living in a world of ambiguity – neither one of us on the brink of disaster. We don't have control of our lives or the people who share them. To admit that does not mean we've failed. The road continues richly, suspensefully, past the edge of a looseleaf map, beyond our ten-year-old hearts.

There are no dragons here, after all.

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